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Chapter 1: Understanding and Realizations

Hermione Jean Granger stood just in the doors leading out toward the courtyard at Hogwarts, gazing forward at a fellow Gryffindor. Last night, the champions for the Tri-Wizard Tournament had been drawn from the Goblet of Fire. Victor Krum, Fleur Delacour, and Cedric Diggory had been chosen to be the champions for Durmstrang, Beauxbatons, and Hogwarts respectively. Shortly after Cedric's name had come out of the goblet, it flared again and a fourth name came out and all hell broke loose. The fourth champion initially refused to participate stating he never put his name in, but as the Goblet of Fire imposed a magically binding contract on the names drawn, he had no choice. The fourth champion was Harry Potter; the one person Hermione knew wanted to stay as far away from the spotlight as possible. Fate, however, kept throwing him into the middle of things year after year. She sometimes wondered how her best friend stayed so grounded; god knows she would have lost it by now.

As Hermione watched Harry leaning up against a tree, his face torn between anger and frustration, she decided Harry needed to know someone was there to support him, and believed he hadn't found a way to trick the Goblet of Fire. She was still irritated over the fact that Ron insisted Harry had to have been responsible for his name coming out of the goblet. He had even gone so far as publicly severing ties with Harry, calling him a cheat and a disgrace to the honorable Gryffindor House. When the prat tried to get Hermione to stop associating with Harry, Hermione threw every non-lethal hex she knew at him. The detention with Flich was worth it, Hermione thought as she finally built up the courage to walk up to Harry.

Screwing up her Gryffindor courage, Hermione walked over to Harry and gently placed her hand on his shoulder. "Harry..." upon hearing Hermione's voice and feeling her hand on his shoulder, Harry turned to look at her and saw a look of understanding in her face. She believes me!, he thought.

"You believe me?" Harry asked, hoping he was reading her face right.

"Of course I do. Anyone with any brains and that actually knows you, should see the idea of you wanting to compete in this tournament is ludicrous," Hermione exclaimed.

"Then we belong to a house of fools. Everyone is either congratulating me on tricking the Goblet of Fire, or glaring at me for doing the same to get in the spot light."

"I know Harry," Hermione replied in an understanding tone. "Madame Pomfrey is still fixing up Ron due to all the hexes I threw at him."

"That was you?" Harry asked astonished at this side of Hermione. "All I could get out of Seamus, once he stopped shaking in fear was 'scary witch, don't make her mad'."

Blushing, Hermione stated, "I warned Ron, that if he didn't keep his mouth shut, he'd lose it."

"And then some, from what I gather," Harry stated with a slight smirk on his face.

"I'm tired of just sitting back and taking the easy way out, and letting others decide how I should act and what to believe. From now on, I am taking a proactive stance in my life." Hermione stated with deadly seriousness.

"Want some company?" Harry asked.

Hermione just stared at Harry, not sure if she heard him correctly. Before she could say anything, however, Harry continued, "I've been standing out here thinking about what all has happened to me since I've come to Hogwarts, and I've come to the conclusion that the headmaster doesn't have my best interests in mind. I think he's using me for some reason. I've let people run my life for too long, and it's time I start running my life, my way."

Shocked at Harry's accusation, Hermione carefully asked, "What makes you think that Headmaster Dumbledore shouldn't be trusted?"

"Well, let's take the last three years individually," Harry explained. "During our first year, there was the Philosopher's Stone incident.

Dumbledore claims the stone was perfectly safe and well guarded here at Hogwarts. The problem I see with that statement, is the fact he announced to the whole student body the third floor corridor was off limits, practically ensuring someone would try to find out why, if for no other reason than it hadn't been in the previous years. Also, the protections around the stone were so simple that three first years could get around them, two of which had no previously knowledge of magic."

"I never thought of it that way, but your right," Hermione stated after thinking about what Harry had said. "If the three of us made it through the protections, then a fully trained adult would have an even easier time."

"Exactly my thought," Harry stated. "As for our second year, how is it a twelve year old could figure out what the monster petrifying the students was before any of the professors? Also, Dumbledore was conveniently absent during the final confrontation with the Basilisk. I'm quite certain Dumbledore is powerful enough and smart enough to recognize a possession by a dark spirit."

"I can't argue your logic on that one, so what about last year?" Hermione asked.

"Last year was the tricky one, but certain things still don't add up. First off, given the wards around Hogwarts, I'm fairly certain Dumbledore knew not only when Sirius entered the grounds, but where he was hiding."

"No argument here, anything else?" Hermione asked.

"Yep, no offense intended, but what responsible adult gives a powerful artifact like a time turner to a thirteen year old?" Harry asked. "Conveniently one who would be smart enough to figure out how to use it to aid in the capture of a dark wizard, who happens to be after a close friend of theirs."

"No offense taken, and I see your point," Hermione stated.

"As for this year," Harry continued. "First we have the Tri-Wizard tournament being held here at Hogwarts. Said tournament hasn't been held for centuries due to the fatality rate of the contestants. Also, said tournament was started up again at the Head of the

Wizenmagot's request to foster cooperation between the schools. I checked into that, and the Head of the Wizenmagot is none other than Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore himself."

"But why would the headmaster want to allow something so dangerous to start up again?" Hermione exclaimed.

"I'm not sure, but there's more. I did some checking in the library about magically binding contracts, and I discovered they are only valid if all parties involved agree of their own free will," Harry stated with an irritated tone in his voice.

"But that means as you had no knowledge or agreement of your name being entered, all you had to do was to openly refuse to participate in the tournament," Hermione exclaimed. "Why would Dumbledore not point something like that out?"

"Exactly my point," Harry stated. "But it's a moot point, as I've already accepted the fact, and am now bound by the contract to compete. As to your question, Dumbledore admitted after the Philosopher's Stone incident, he knows why Voldemort went after me thirteen years ago, but refused to tell me. He stated it wasn't important at the time."

"That's absurd, of course it's important to know why a power mad wizard wants you dead," Hermione exclaimed furiously. "What are you going to do?"

"If I'm going to keep getting thrown into these messes, I need to be better prepared for them," answered Harry.

"Given what you've just told me, I agree with you," stated Hermione looking down at her feet. "If you don't mind associating with a know-it-all busybody, I'd like to join you."

Holding Hermione's chin gently in his hand, Harry tilted her head so she was looking at him and replied, "I'd love for you to join me." He then stated more firmly, "You are not a know-it-all busybody, Hermione, and don't ever call yourself that. You're the smartest witch of our generation, and don't let anyone tell you otherwise."

Hermione blushed, and told Harry she'd try.

With that, the two of them went off to the library to finish their homework for the week and to start planning what they needed to do to prepare for whatever was to come.

- Potions Lab -

Ronald Weasley was pissed off and mentally ranting about how unfair life was. Why does Potter get all the glory and fame. It's not like he even deserves it. I'm from a respectable Pureblood family and I'm stuck playing second fiddle to the bloody Boy-Who-Lived. On top of which, Hermione insists Potter was entered against his will. If she's so smart, why doesn't she see the truth when it's so obvious Potter is an attention seeking prat.

As he was mentally ranting about the injustice of things, Ron didn't hear Draco Malfoy walking up, until Draco commented, "So Weasley, I hear you've finally seen the truth about Potter."

"If you mean the truth that Harry Potter is a self-absorbed, attention seeking, half-blood prat, then yes Malfoy I have. What of it?" Ron asked suspiciously.

"I figured, since you've finally seen the light about Potter, you might be open to discussing other opinions about the Wizarding world," Draco casually mentioned.

Ron looked at Draco Malfoy and thought, Maybe it's time to start shedding my thickheaded act. Standing up, Ron held out his hand in friendship, and said "Ronald Bilius Weasley, and I would very much like to have that discussion with you. I feel my education in certain matters has been somewhat lacking or outright incorrect."

Smiling, Draco took the offered hand, and shook it, replying, "Draco Ares Malfoy, at your service. Let's retire to a more private location and let me enlighten you to the way things really are."

With that, Ron followed Draco back to the Slytherin common room. Once there, the two of them sat down and began a discussion about Pureblood rights, the Muggle tainting of the Wizarding world, and like topics. As they continued their discussion, Ron slowly began to realize that Draco had been right four years ago when he told Potter some Wizarding Families were better than others. What Draco had meant was that certain families refused to acknowledge the simple

fact that the Pureblood way of thinking was the correct way, and anyone who thought differently was guilty of betraying their own kind, hence the term 'blood traitor'.

Two hours later, Ron thanked Draco for enlightening him, and headed back to the Gryffindor Tower to drop off his books, before heading to dinner.

- Library -

Harry and Hermione quickly finished the remainder of their homework and began to sketch out what they needed to learn, but they wouldn't learn in their classes.

"Generally speaking, I think the first things we need to learn are Legilimency and Occlumency, Silent Casting, and Wandless Magic," suggested Harry.

"I understand the need for Silent Casting and Wandless Magic, as they would give a distinct advantage over another wizard, but why the mind magics?" Hermione asked. "Wouldn't higher level spells make more sense?"

"From what I've read, Occlumency would help prevent another wizard from learning your secrets or what spell you were about to use. It also helps you learn how to focus and organize your mind, which is needed for more complex spells. Legilimency seems to be a natural offshoot to learning Occlumency. Not to mention a useful skill to have," Harry explained.

"I hadn't thought of it that way," Hermione admitted. "However, we need to find a place where we can practice without anyone finding out what we are up to."

With that, the two teenagers began looking at the Marauder's Map, which Harry had gotten in the habit of keeping with him, along with his invisibility cloak, to avoid being accosted by other students about the tournament. After several minutes of searching, they were still at a loss as to where they could practice. The two Gryffindors also realized they were massively late for dinner. Hermione groaned as she was starting to get hungry, but Harry reassured her that there was nothing to worry about.

"Fred and George showed me where the entrance to the kitchen is. I'm sure we'll be able to get a bite to eat there. From what I understand, the house elves hate it when students go hungry; hence all the food at meal times."

"That does explain a bit," Hermione stated. "Do you think the house elves would mind talking about their culture? I hate that they're practically slaves to wizards, but I don't know what the house elves think of the situation."

"I don't think they'd mind," Harry replied. "It can't hurt to ask though. Especially since the extent of my knowledge of house elves comes from Dobby."

While Hermione organized the notes they had taken, Harry went to return the books to the shelves. Bidding Madam Pince good night, they headed off to the kitchen to see if they could get a bite to eat.

- Great Hall -

As he was eating, Ron noticed neither Harry nor Hermione had come to dinner. I wonder where those two are? Probably trying to figure out how Potter can milk more attention out of the tournament. Draco was right, it's fools like Potter and Granger who are dragging down the rest of Wizarding World. I'm glad I decided to give Draco a chance to explain his point of view. His Pureblood philosophy makes more sense than the rhetoric I learned at home. I'll have to be careful around the rest of my house, so as not to reveal my change of heart. It will be a good challenge for the very cunning the Sorting Hat saw in me four years ago.

"Hey Ron, have you seen Harry or Hermione, lately?" Seamus asked.

"Nope. Hermione's probably studying in the library as usual. As for Harry, who knows where he's at these days," Ron answered, managing to hide any scorn from his voice.

Across the hall at the Slytherin table, Draco Malfoy was pleased at how his day was turning out. He was currently rereading the letter he had written to his father.

Esteemed Father,

I feel that today may be a turning point in the Pureblood way of life here at Hogwarts. It appears even the poor can wield intelligence as well as the wealthy.

Your obedient son,

Draco Ares Malfoy

Satisfied with the letter's contents, Draco folded the letter up put it back in his robes. He would send it off to his father later that night.

- Kitchen -

While the rest of Hogwarts was eating in the Great Hall, Harry and Hermione were being treated to a private meal by themselves. Moments after entering the kitchen, they had been tackled by Dobby, who was currently working in the kitchen. Harry and Hermione soon found themselves being herded to a quiet corner of the kitchen and told to eat as 'kind Harry Potter and Mione Granger shouldn't be starving themselves.'

Seeing Harry smiling, Hermione asked, "Knut for your thoughts?"

"Wondering what you would do if I called you that," Harry answered.

"Called me what?" Hermione asked suspiciously.

"Mione," Harry quietly replied with a slow blush appearing on his face.

Hermione was taken back for a moment, when she noticed his reaction to her question, Does he mean what I think he means, Hermione wondered.

"I don't know, that seems like an awfully personal nickname to me, Mr. Potter," Hermione stated with a slight smile on her face. Please say I'm not reading more into this then there is.

Come on Potter, just bloody ask her already. Are you a Gryffindor or not. Harry's mind argued with him.

Screwing up his courage, Harry managed to stumble out, "Hermione...um...would you...err...be my girlfriend?"

Deciding to throw caution to the wind, Hermione leaned over and kissed Harry full on the lips. Startled at first, but Harry soon realized he wasn't dreaming and returned Hermione's kiss full force. As the two of them were currently preoccupied by pouring all their feelings they had been holding back into their first kiss, neither one noticed the bright golden glow that surrounded them for a moment before disappearing. This event did not go unnoticed by Dobby the house elf. They is finally seeing clearly, the house elf thought gleefully.

Chapter 2: The Room of Requirement and Dobby's Secret

Several minutes later, a not so subtle clearing of a throat brought the two Gryffindors back to the present. They both shared similar sheepish looks, as they looked at Dobby smiling at them.

"Young master and mistress can be bonding later. They is needing to finish eating now," Dobby said sternly.

Blushing even deeper, Harry and Hermione quickly separated and quietly continued to eat the meal in front of them. Still slightly embarrassed at being caught kissing, Hermione quietly asked, "Dobby, um...would you mind answering a question about house elves?"

"Dobby not minding, what is young mistress wanting to know?"

"Why is it that house elves don't seem to mind serving wizards, even good wizards?" asked Hermione.

"Not so simple an answer that one, but Dobby do his best," Dobby replied. "House elves are needing to be bound to a wizard or Wizarding family, or their magic is being drained, then life is going away. Since beginning it has been this way."

"That's horrid," exclaimed Hermione. "Can't a house elf do anything if they are bound to a bad wizard like you were with the Malfoys?"

At this, Dobby broke out in a mischievous grin, Harry immediately recognized as the same type of grin the Weasley twins got when they were planning a new prank. "While we is having to obey our masters, we can be choosing to withhold information from them unless they be asking specific questions. If a house elf be serving good masters they tends to be doing what they can to help and trying to anticipate their masters wishes."

"So if a house elf serves someone who treats them with respect and kindness, the house elf would tend to help them more than if the wizard treated them badly," Hermione asked to clarify what she had heard. Dobby nodded in reply.

Realizing she wouldn't be able to do anything about the house elves' situation at this time, Hermione let the matter drop for now. At this

time she figured the best she could do was to get people to treat the house elves with respect and kindness.

Meanwhile, Harry had remembered something and turned to his erratic friend. "Dobby, I was wondering if you know of a place where Hermione and I could practice our magic and such in private?"

Dobby thought for a moment, and the jumping up and down, replied, "Dobby is knowing the perfect place for young master and mistress to be going for privacy. We house elves call it the Come and Go Room, but students be calling it the Room of Requirement. It is being on the seventh floor of castle. You is needing to look for the tapestry of trolls dancing funny. You is to walk past the opposite wall three times and be thinking hard about what type of room yous be needing. The door will be appearing after walking past for the third time.

"Thank you Dobby, you're the best. That sounds exactly like the type of place we are looking for," Hermione said giving the elf a hug. Harry also thanked Dobby for his help. Dobby stood up straighter after receiving such praise. Saying good night to the house elves, the two Gryffindors headed back to the Gryffindor Common Room, as it was getting late and they didn't want to arouse anyone's suspicions.

- Somewhere in a forest overlooking Stonehenge -

A middle-aged man, dressed in the garments of the ancient Druids, was suddenly awoken by a wind blowing through his cottage. Realizing something important had just occurred, he hurried over to the fire which was burning steadily in the hearth. As he sat down before the fire, the man began to whisper softly an ancient chant he had learned years ago. Gazing deeply into the flames, the man slipped into a light trance as his spirit sought out the answers to the disturbance which he had sensed moments earlier. Several minutes later, he smiled and rose from where he had been sitting. As he began to make preparations for the coming journey, he said to himself, "The prophecy's fulfillment has begun at last. "

- The Great Hall at Hogwarts -

The next morning, being a Saturday, found the Gryffindor table practically empty. Save for Harry and Hermione, who were early

risers, the only Gryffindors at breakfast were seventh years who usually spent the weekends either preparing for their N.E.W.T.S, or working on independent projects.

"I wonder how long Ron will need to stay in the hospital wing?" Harry mentioned to Hermione as they ate their breakfast.

"Please don't tell me you're starting to feel guilty over what happened last night?" Hermione asked still upset over the incident.

- FLASHBACK -

Harry and Hermione managed to make it back to the portrait of the Fat Lady without being seen, but then, unfortunately, their luck had run out. As they entered through the portrait hole, Ron Weasley was coming down the stairs of the fourth year boys dorms chatting with Seamus Finnigan about Quidditch. When he turned and saw Potter and Hermione entering the Gryffindor Common Room holding each others hand, he became irritated. That glory seeking prat. First he has to get himself entered into the tournament, then the pompous prat has the gall to turn Hermione against me. Sure Granger isn't a Pureblood, but she has her uses, Ron thought as he fumed at Potter getting his way again.

"Hey Hermione! What the bloody hell are you doing with Potter? Didn't I explain well enough that Potter is only out for himself?" Ron exclaimed as he stepped closer to Potter and Hermione. "I mean come on, I forgave you for hexing me earlier since it was obvious he had you fooled like everyone else. For a supposedly smart witch, Hermione, you're being awfully stupid and naïve," Ron stated angrily, as he grabbed Hermione by the arm and pulled her away from Harry. "Now get away from him, before you lose what little respect you have in Gryffindor."

Harry had had enough. He was through turning the other cheek, and being the better person. Insulting him was one thing, living with the Dursleys had given him pretty thick skin, but insulting Hermione was entirely different. Harry didn't even bother drawing his wand. Instead, he quickly closed the gap between Ron and himself, and rammed his fist right into Ron's gut, then Harry brought up his fist and connected with Ron's chin.

Leaning over Ron's body, Harry growled out, "Insult or bully Hermione again, and I swear you'll regret you ever set foot in Hogwarts. With that, he calmly walked over to Hermione and, after making sure she was okay, gave her a chaste kiss on her lips. Harry then walked Hermione to the steps leading to her dorms, and then headed up to his own.

Fred and George Weasley were shocked to say the least. They just didn't know what shocked them more: Ron behaving like their older brother Percy with his condescending attitude, or the fact that Harry had shown he was not someone they ever wanted to piss off.

- END OF FLASHBACK -

Growling, Harry replied, "Hell no! The bloody, foul mouthed, back stabbing git deserved everything he got. I was wondering more specifically, how long we would have before we would have to put up with him again.

"Madame Pomfrey stated that he would be released later today, Mr. Potter," came a very familiar stern voice from behind them.

Both Harry and Hermione froze. Gulping, they slowly turned around, and in front of them stood their head of house, Professor McGonagall.

"Good morning professor," Harry said giving her a lopsided grin. "How are you this morning."

His father used to give me that same lopsided grin when he was trying to get out of trouble, Minerva McGonagall thought with a smile. "Good morning Mr. Potter, Miss. Granger. Would the two of you kindly come to my office after breakfast. There is something I need to discuss with the two of you."

"Sure thing, Professor," Hermione replied with her own version of an 'I'm innocent' smile.

Merlin help us, Minerva thought as she walked out of the Great Hall and back to her office, If I didn't know any better, I'd swear history was repeating itself. I do believe Harry is rubbing off on Hermione, much like James did with Lily. Fortunately, it looks like Hermione is also starting to rub off on Harry, as he seems to be paying more

attention in class. Perhaps Harry's name coming out of the Goblet of Fire has had a positive side effect?

"Miss Granger, I do believe we are in trouble," Harry pointed out to Hermione with a smile.

"I do believe you're right Mr. Potter. But at least we're consistent," Hermione replied.

Two seconds later, neither of the two of them could hold it in any longer and burst out laughing.

After calming themselves down, they left the Great Hall and headed toward Professor McGonagall's office.

- Infirmary -

Draco, using a cloaking charm his father taught him, snuck into the infirmary to check on Ron. Bloody Gryffindor can't keep his mouth shut. Admittedly, it's hard not to degrade Potter and the filthy mudblood.

"Hey Ron, what the bloody hell were you thinking," Draco hissed.

"Behaving like my housemates would expect me to act; a jealous thickheaded git," Ron quietly explained. "Though, I didn't count on Potter stooping to Muggle fighting."

"Good point," Draco said after a moment. "At this stage in the game, we don't want to expose all of the pieces."

"Exactly," Ron remarked. "The first rule of chess is Patience Above All Else."

- Professor McGonagall's Office -

Minerva McGonagall was trying to get to the bottom of the fight which occurred in the Gryffindor Common Room the night before, between two students who were said to be close friends.

"Now would either of you care to explain what happened with Mr Weasley last night, which necessitated his ending up in the hospital wing?"

"Not really, ma'am," Harry answered politely.

"Care to try again Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall replied coolly with a stern look on her face.

Gulping, Harry thought Potter you idiot, irritating McGonagall is almost as bad as irritating Mrs. Weasley. "Ron had it coming. Ever since my name was drawn for the tournament, he's been on my back about one thing or another. Last night he crossed the line when he insulted and tried to bully Hermione. You can assign any punishment you want, but I will not apologize for my actions."

"While I can understand your point of view, I will not have members of my house brawling like common Muggles."

"Well since Professor Dumbledore took it upon himself to ensure I was raised by common Muggles, and makes it next to impossible to learn about the customs of the Wizarding society, then you'll have to direct your concerns about my fighting style to him."

Minerva McGonagall opened her mouth to say something, but closed it again as she realized Harry had a point; still fighting was not acceptable. "Be that as it may, fighting of any kind is against the rules. As such, you will have detention every night, with me, for a week starting on Monday."

"Yes, ma'am," Harry replied as he realized that it could have been worse.

"Professor, since Harry is being punished for standing up for me, what are you going to do with Ron?" Hermione asked.

"Don't misunderstand me, Hermione," Professor McGonagall assured the young witch. "Unofficially, I can't fault Harry for what he did. Mr. Weasley will be also be spending a week in detention. However, he will be spending it with Professor Snape."

Both Harry's and Hermione's jaws dropped at hearing that. After talking a bit with their head of house, Harry and Hermione bid her goodbye and headed up to the seventh floor in search of the tapestry which Dobby had told them about the previous night. After a few minutes, Harry called Hermione over to a large tapestry he had

come across. According to the plaque beside it, the tapestry was of Barnabas the Barmy trying to teach trolls to dance ballet.

"This is got to be the tapestry that Dobby was talking about," Hermione agreed.

"There is only one way to find out," Harry stated as he walked over to the opposite wall and proceeded to walk back and forth thinking, I need a place for Hermione and I to train. Sure enough, after the third pass a door appeared. As the two teenagers walked into the room, they found themselves in a room filled with training dummies, dueling circles, and several books filled with spells and fighting techniques.

"Dobby was right," Harry exclaimed. "This is exactly the type of place we've been looking for."

While Hermione looked through the books and jotting down titles, Harry explored the room. As he looked around, Harry noticed that besides magical devices such as the training dummies and dueling circles, the room had provided what looked like Muggle exercise and weight training equipment. Interesting that the room would include Muggle equipment when I've only heard about these machines, but have never seen them, Harry thought to himself.

Heading back to where Hermione was, Harry told her what all he had found. "My dad had to take me to the gym he works out at last summer, and I learned what all the machines were supposed to do, so I can show you how to use them," Hermione commented.

"That it explains it. When I was pacing back and forth in front of the room, I was thinking I need a place for Hermione and I to train. The room must have picked up on the Muggle equipment from you," explained Harry.

"That seems logical," Hermione agreed.

"No offense, Mione," Harry asked, "but why did your father have to take you along to the gym?"

Hermione muttered something.

"I didn't quite catch that," Harry asked.

Hermione sighed and thought, Just tell him Granger. Given his childhood, or lack thereof, Harry can definitely relate. Harnessing her Gryffindor courage, Hermione replied, "I was grounded at the time, and my parents didn't trust me to be in the house by myself. Before you ask, I was grounded for mouthing off to my parents about how the magical world was not unnatural, contrary to their closed-minded beliefs."

Harry's eyes narrowed and he asked coolly, "What do they mean by unnatural?"

"My parents are of the belief that magic is evil and those who use it have had their souls irredeemably corrupted. The only reason why they allow me to attend Hogwarts is that according to Ministry law once a Muggleborn starts at a magical school, they are deemed a part of the magical world. As Muggles, my parents lost all say in my education when they signed the forms allowing me to attend Hogwarts," Hermione explained. Taking a drink of water provided by the room, Hermione continued, "The only reason they signed those forms was the fact that it was the only way they knew for me to gain control over my magic, and to halt any occurrences of accidental magic. Usually, during the breaks, they simply shun me and don't acknowledge me other than to pick me up and drop me off at Kings Crossing. After what happened last year, they don't even do that. I had to take the Knight Bus to the station at the start of term."

"I can definitely relate," Harry replied as he gently pulled Hermione into a comfortable hug. "Sounds like your parents and the Dursleys would get along quite well."

"From what you've told me," Hermione chuckled, "I'd have to agree with you on that."

"On a more pleasant topic, what books did you find that we could start studying from?" asked Harry.

Pulling out the list she had made, Hermione replied, "I found the following books I think we could start with: *Defending Your Psyche* and *Examining Others* by Derek Wills, *Wards: Basic to Complex* by Lief Grungson and Aidan Hearthstone, and *Auror Level Charms and Their Counters* by Syllus Manx. The only problem I can think of is

these books are probably restricted by the Ministry, and I don't think these copies can leave the room."

"So we need to find a place that would sell these books, and overlook any Ministry restrictions," Harry said. "Knockturn Alley would serve that purpose, but we also need to find someone, we can trust to keep it secret, who can get them for us."

The two of them sat down and thought about the situation. After a few minutes, Harry remembered something he had noticed earlier but didn't pay any attention to it at the time. Suddenly a mischievous looking smile appeared on Harry's face then he started laughing, "That sneaky little house elf. Why didn't I figure this out before!"

"Harry James Potter, what are you talking about?" Hermione asked.

"Remember when Dobby was explaining to us about house elves needing to bond with a wizard or Wizarding family, or they would lose their magic and eventually die."

"Yes, what of it," Hermione asked curiously.

"How does Dobby refer to Dumbledore, any of the other faculty, or students?" replied Harry.

"By their name or some variation of it," Hermione answered. "Although he refers to the Weasley twins as the Laughing Wheezes."

"Now, how does he refer to me, and lately you as well," questioned Harry.

"By our names of course," Hermione replied. Her eyes suddenly widened, "No he doesn't. Why that sneaky house elf. He called us 'young master and mistress' last night."

"Exactly, if my guess is right, Dobby has bonded himself to either me or given last night, both of us," Harry replied.

"If you're right, than he would be able to go to Knockturn Alley and get the books for us," Hermione surmised.

"Only, one way to find out," Harry commented. "Dobby, I have need of you."

pop

"Young master is calling Dobby," the erratic house elf squealed with glee. "What can Dobby be doing for the young master?"

Harry and Hermione looked at each other and smiled.

Chapter 3: Books, Bonds, and Blocks

"A couple of things," Harry stated, "but first I've got a couple of questions. Are you bonded to just me, or Hermione as well? Secondly, why didn't you tell us?"

Dobby's ears flattened against the sides of his head, and he looked down at his feet. "Dobby be bonding with young master when he be freeing Dobby from bad masters. House elf bond be extending to young mistress last night when yous be starting life bond. Dobby not be saying anything as Dobby thought young master and mistress knows about bond as wizards be feeling house elf bond."

Harry knelt down so he was at Dobby's level and put his hand on Dobby's shoulder. "We're not angry with you Dobby. It's not your fault we can't feel the bond." Harry glanced up at Hermione, who understanding his unspoken question, also knelt down besides Harry and, gently placing her hand under Dobby's chin, lifted up Dobby's head and reassured the nervous house elf, "Dobby, both Harry and I are honored to have you as our house elf."

Dobby ears perked up and excitedly thanked them both, as he hugged them.

"There are a few rules you'll need to follow as our house elf," Harry explained. "First off, no punishing yourself. If you think you've done something wrong, come to one of us, and we'll decide if punishment is even necessary. Secondly, it's Harry and Hermione. Also, for now, we need to keep the fact that you're our house elf secret, as it could cause problems. Lastly, in regards to wages, I'll let you and Hermione figure that out later, as I have no comparison to go by."

"Now that the issue of you being bonded to us has been resolved, what's this about a life bond between Harry and I," asked Hermione.

"When yous and Master Harry be kissing last night, your magics is recognizing each other as its other half and started joining together. Life bond be similar to Wizarding marriage bond, but is created and witnessed by magic," Dobby explained.

"So what you're saying is, due to this life bond, the Wizarding world recognizes us as husband and wife?" Hermione asked.

"Yes and no." Dobby replied, "Magical peoples like goblins and house elves be seeing yous as married. Humans no longer sees bond, so would only be noticing if another bond be trying to be done. Life bond is deeper and forever. Only death be breaking.

"Mione...um..I," Harry started to say with a worried look on his face.

Seeing the scared look on Harry's face, Hermione thought Damn those Dursleys, Harry's afraid I don't want to be tied to him. Hermione quickly resolved to banish any fears Harry might have. She stepped up to him and, placing her hands gently on the sides of his head, gave him a passionate kiss. She then leaned closer and whispered in Harry's ear, "I'm yours forever."

Looking deep into Hermione's eyes, Harry replied with a soft smile, "And I'm yours forever." With this said, they embraced each other tightly and pressed their lips together. As with their first kiss, a pulsating golden glow surrounded them, but this time it was brighter and more intense. After a several minutes the glow faded. Both Harry and Hermione separated and both fell back unconscious, and would have hit the floor if chairs hadn't appeared to catch them.

Several minutes later, Harry and Hermione woke up, and after shaking the daze from their heads, they felt better than they had in years. "Dobby what happened to us?" Hermione asked.

After conjuring a glass of mystwyne(elven lemonade) for each of them, Dobby went on to explain, "Master Harry and Mistress Hermione yous be completing the life bond. Also,while yous be sleeping, Dobby be checking your magic and is finding out that yous be having powerful blocks on your magics. That be why yous sleeping. Life bond breaking through blocks when completing."

"Who would put a block on our magic?" Harry asked angrily.

"Dobby not knowing this, Master Harry," Dobby replied. "Dobby was seeing that block be binding most of Master Harry's and Mistress Hermione's magic. Whose ever be doing this is bad wizard. Blocking so much magic be preventing Master Harry and Mistress Hermione from using their magic properly."

"We'll have to be careful not to let anyone know about this until we're sure who put the blocks on us," warned Hermione.

"Good call," Harry agreed. "Also, we'd better practice our charms and such as we'll have to get used to the added power."

Agreeing with Harry, Hermione then turned to Dobby and explained they needed him to go to Diagon Alley and Knockturn Alley to purchase the books she had found. When Harry asked Dobby if he needed to write a note to Gringotts authorizing Dobby to withdraw the necessary funds.

"Letter not needed Master Harry," Dobby explained. "Goblins be seeing that Dobby is bonded with Master Harry, and will allow withdrawal." With that, Dobby took the list from Hermione and popped out of the room.

At this point, the two Gryffindors decided to head to lunch, but not before Hermione took notes from the book on Occlumency, so she and Harry could get started on learning it after lunch.

- Malfoy Manor -

Lucius Malfoy was very pleased with his son's recent letter. If he was reading it correctly, then Draco had managed the impossible: getting a member of the Weasley family to turn away from the equality stance of Albus Dumbledore, and accept the proper Pureblood belief of superiority. Lucius had sent a letter, charmed against eavesdropping, back to Draco to slowly indoctrinate young Ronald Weasley in the correct philosophy.

With this development, along with the fact his brother-in-law, Sirius Black, was still free and preparing for the return of their Dark Lord, was making this a very good year. Added to this, Lucius had been able to steadily increase his available resources both financially and politically, insuring the Black and Malfoy Families' place in the Dark Lord's inner circle, upon his return.

- Hogwarts -

Both Harry and Hermione groaned as they entered the Great Hall for lunch, as Ron had been discharged from the hospital wing and was piling food into his mouth in his usual shovel method. Sitting as far from Ron as possible, they sat down and started to eat, both praying that Ron just kept his opinions to himself. Fortunately, other than

glaring over in their direction, Ron kept to himself. As they were leaving, they heard a voice call out to them. Turning around, they saw Neville and Ginny coming up to them.

"Thanks for waiting, you two," Neville replied.

"No problem Nev, what's up?" Harry said. Neville and Ginny, along with the twins, were the only Gryffindors who seemed to believe that Harry had no part in his name coming out of the Goblet of Fire.

"We were on our way to the greenhouses, as I am tutoring Ginny in Herbology, when we saw you," replied Neville.

"I wanted to apologize for my prat of a brother's behavior, last night," Ginny stated. "The twins and I don't know what's going on with him lately. He's always been short-tempered, even for a Weasley, and jealous. The twins figure that Ron believes he shouldn't have to work hard at anything, and that the world owes him. Even the twins know if they want their dream of opening a joke shop to succeed, they'll have to work hard at it."

"Thanks for sharing that with us," Hermione commented. "It definitely explains a few things about Ron."

"It makes me wonder if Ron was ever our friend, or just using us," Harry wondered aloud. "Hermione for her smarts, and me for my bloody fame."

"I hate saying it," Neville answered, "but from what I've seen and heard over the years, I'd have to lean toward the latter of the two."

Both Harry and Hermione, reluctantly, had to agree with Neville. After chatting for a bit, Neville and Ginny headed off to the greenhouses, while Harry and Hermione headed out to the lake for some peace and quiet. Upon finding a secluded spot, they put up some privacy wards they had learned while studying for Charms.

"After learning about the blocks, I've been thinking we're going to have to adjust our to-do list," Harry mentioned to Hermione as they settled down with some books and the Occlumency notes Hermione had made.

"Along with learning advance topics like Wandless and Silent Casting, I'm more convinced than ever that we need to learn Occlumency," Harry continued. "Someone put those blocks on us for a reason, and my thinking is they were trying to hide something from us. If we only had access to a tiny fraction of our power, then what other things could the blocks have prevented us from doing. I read somewhere certain magical talents required powerful magical cores to function properly. What if who ever was blocking our magic was actually trying to suppress something else."

"You have a good point there, Harry," Hermione agreed. "I've already noticed I seem more energized and clear headed. It's like hearing for the first time, after being deaf for years."

"Exactly," Harry replied, "and I think I know where we can find out more."

"Where?" Hermione asked excitedly.

"Gringotts," Harry answered with a grin. "I remember Bill Weasley mentioning something about witnessing a Lineage Test at Gringotts. Some wizard was trying to prove he had a right to some vault. I figure if Gringotts had a way to determine someone's lineage, they might know of a way to determine someone's talents. Plus, they are known for their discretion."

"That's a great idea," Hermione exclaimed, "but how are we going to get there without anyone knowing?"

"Unfortunately," Harry replied, "we're going to have to wait until Christmas break, at the earliest. Barring that, summer break."

Shelving this for now, the two started to look over Hermione's notes on Occlumency.

- Somewhere in a forest overlooking Stonehenge -

Inside his cottage, Dari Àrmann was busy shrinking and packing most of his belongs into a trunk. As he was doing so, he reflected back on the events from the previous night. The two children of prophecy had started down the path the Gods had laid before them. He could still remember the night the Goddess Brigid had appeared to him and gave him the prophecy."

- FLASHBACK -

It's been a pretty exciting day thought Dari Àrmann as he finished cleaning up his dishes from supper. Alric and Dani have finally said their vows. I was beginning to wonder if those two would ever make the final leap and marry. Those two have only been seeing each other for the past seven years. I'm honored that they choose to get married in the Old Ways of their ancestors. While I've got nothing against the Christian beliefs, their attitude about trying to convert people to their way of thinking is seriously out of line. Fortunately, the town is far enough from the bigger cities, so its people can follow the ways of their ancestors without too much worry from local Christians. I still find it somewhat amusing that the man Alric had standing with him, was a Christian.

Just as he was finishing the last of the dishes, a voice called out to him, "Dari Àrmann, last of the druids, hear me and listen."

Quickly turning around, Dari Àrmann was immediately aware he was in the presence of Brigid, ancient Celtic Goddess of Fire. He dropped to one knee and bowed his head, saying, "Brigid, I Dari Àrmann hear you and await."

"Know that I and my brethren are pleased with you, and have a task to set before you. The time will come when our ancient home will be torn asunder by wizards who have perverted their gifts for evil use and those who remain in the Light. Listen well, and heed my words."

The time of the twin stars that hold the power to vanquish the Dark Lords approaches

the Raven child born at the sun's peak and the long arms' day belongs to the Fey child

as one is marked by death, the other by life, and they will have the power the Dark Lords know not

what was once hindered will be set free by two made one

the Powers of Fire and Shadow will meet ere the wheel turns

With that the presence was gone. Dari sighed, "There are times when being the last of the druids can be really tiring."

- END OF FLASHBACK -

"One of the many things I hate about prophecies: no bloody concept of time." There have been numerous Dark Lords since then, not to mention one Dark Lady, yet none seemed to be the ones foretold in the prophecy. Then this Voldemort character shows up, and immediately Dari recognized him as one of the ones mentioned. When he was banished by a one year old child, he thought he had been mistaken until he had discovered that only Voldemort's body had been destroyed. His spirit was still out there, waiting to return. Dari Àrmann suspected he knew who the other Dark Lord was, but the wizard had been clever enough to hide his true nature behind a veil of righteousness. Then last night, he was assaulted by visions sent by Brigid. Visions of a young boy and girl in what appeared to be a kitchen of some sort. They were kissing, and a golden glow surrounded them for a moment. It appeared that the children spoken of in the prophecy had found each other.

After casting the Ogham, Dari was able to narrow their location to Scotland. Remembering the vision he had witnessed, he suspected, given the outfits the children were wearing, they must be students at Hogwarts. Dumbledore is going to be a problem. Manipulative old goat that he is. However, this may give me a chance to investigate my suspicions.

- Hogwarts -

After going through their Occlumency notes, Harry and Hermione learned the first step was to clear their minds and organize their thoughts. As this was a personal step which they had to take by themselves. They decided to start going through their old books and practice the charms and transfigurations they had learned in the previous years, in order to learn how to control the increase in power which they both now possessed. Suffice to say, after sending several feathers into orbit, they realized this had been a very good idea. So for the next several hours, they alternated between practicing with their magic, reading through their books, and just talking about things completely unrelated to the Wizarding world. That night, they decided to skip supper in the Great Hall, and after procuring a picnic basket from Dobby, they headed to the Room of

Requirement to have a quiet dinner away from all the accusing glares.

The following week went by without too many issues. Harry and Hermione continued with their training in the Room of Requirement, and as Dobby had returned with the purchased books on Sunday, they began to go through them as well. Thursday, during Transfiguration class, Professor McGonagall asked both Harry and Hermione to stay after class for a few moments.

After closing and locking the door, Professor McGonagall turned to two of her best students, "First off, I'd like to congratulate you both on your last test. I'm glad to see Miss Granger's study habits are starting to rub off on you." Hermione blushed slightly at the compliment. "Secondly, I noticed things are still strained between the two of you and Mr. Weasley. Can I assume his attitude has not changed?" With seeing the two nod their heads, Minerva sighed. "Lastly, I need to remind you, Mr Potter, the weighing of the wands will take place tomorrow afternoon after lunch, followed by interviews with a reporter from the Daily Prophet."

"Great, more bloody publicity I don't need or want," grumbled Harry.

"I understand your frustration Mr. Potter, I don't approve of this tournament myself, but the Headmaster insisted the proper precautions have been taken to ensure the champions safety."

Resisting the urge to point out how Professor Dumbledore's version of safety resulted in the incidents of the last few years at Hogwarts, Harry simply asked, "I take it there is no way of getting out of giving an interview?"

"Unfortunately no, however, as you are still considered a minor it would be perfectly acceptable to have an adult present to make sure you were not taken advantage of," Professor McGonagall replied.

"Would you be willing to come with?" Harry asked.

"I'd be glad to," Professor McGonagall replied. "Given the fact it will be Rita Skeeter doing the interviews, I definitely want another adult present. I do not trust the woman at all. Her articles all seem to stretch the truth or are outright lies."

"Then I definitely want you there when I give the interview," Harry said.

With that, Professor McGonagall wrote them a note for their next professor, and Harry and Hermione headed off to Ancient Runes. Professor Babbling had been explaining the runic system used by the ancient druids centuries earlier in this very country, and neither wanted to miss anything.

Just before Ancient Runes ended for the day Professor Babbling got the students attention, as they were currently working on a classroom assignment. "Students, before you leave class please get into groups of two," Professor Babbling requested. As the students got into groups, Professor Babbling continued, "Given the Tri-Wizard tournament is going on this year, I have decided to give you your final exam for the class earlier this year. It is going to be in the form of a final project, and you will have until the end of the term to complete it."

With this announcement, most of the class groaned at the news, but Harry and Hermione just looked at each other and smiled. Both were thinking this would be the perfect opportunity to gain access to the restricted section of the library.

"For your final project, I want each group to design, develop, and be able to demonstrate a practical application of a complex rune-work. Your grade will be determined by the complexity, the practicality, and the originality of your finished work." finished Professor Babbling.

"Professor, can we talk to you for a second?" Harry asked walking up to the Ancient Runes professor after class.

"Of course Mr. Potter," Professor Babbling replied. "What can I do for you and Miss Granger?"

"We were wondering if we could get a pass for the restricted section of the library?" Harry asked. "We were thinking there might be some useful tomes on runes we could use in our project."

Not being clueless, and having taught both James Potter and Lillian Evans, Professor Babbling asked suspiciously, "Any other reasons?"

"Other reasons?" Harry and Hermione replied in unison with their individual You can trust me looks.

Professor Babbling chuckled and said, "Mr. Potter, that look didn't work for your father when he was in my class, and Miss Granger, I raised two daughters, and that look didn't work for them either."

Both Gryffindors had the common courtesy to look ashamed, before Harry confessed, "We also thought it might help me prepare for the tournament, seeing as I have three years less education than the other contestants."

"I'll give you both an unrestricted pass for the remainder of the school year on two conditions," Professor Babbling replied. "First, I expect you both not to abuse this privilege. Secondly, I will be holding you to a higher standard on the project as you will have access to more resources."

"Agreed," the two replied. With that, Professor Babbling wrote out two passes for them to give to Madam Pince in the library. Thanking their professor again, Harry and Hermione headed back to Gryffindor Tower to drop off their books before heading to the library.

While Madam Pince wasn't happy about letting them have access to the restricted section, due to her protectiveness of the books, she keyed them into the wards protecting that part of the library. After locating a few interesting books, Harry and Hermione tucked themselves into a far corner of the library. Once they had put up privacy wards, they settled down to going through what they had found.

After several minutes of studying, Harry got Hermione's attention and said, "I've got an idea for a project."

"What did you have in mind Harry?" Hermione asked.

"I was reading that the ancient druids made heavy use of Ogham runes in their protective wards and defenses. From what I've read about them, and what little research I've done on the charm that hide my parents, I think we could develop a runic warding pattern, using Ogham runes, to duplicate the effects of the Fidelius Charm."

Hermione's jaw dropped at hearing Harry's suggestion. "Harry that's bloody brilliant," she exclaimed.

"Language, Hermione," Harry said with mock seriousness.

Blushing, Hermione continued, "If we could figure it out, then it would be easier and less taxing for people to use."

"Exactly," Harry continued. "It would also eliminate the need for a secret keeper."

Hermione nodded as she gave Harry a tight hug, as she understood Harry's motivation for this.

After another hour of studying and taking notes, Harry and Hermione returned the books, and headed to the kitchen to grab some food for lunch, before heading to the Room of Requirement to practice and exercise. Today they decided to concentrate on Silent Casting.

"Is it just me, or does it seem easier to do this?" Hermione asked after a while.

"It's not just you," Harry confirmed. "With the blocks removed from our magical cores, I'm guessing we'll have an easier time doing a lot of things. I've also noticed my concentration and memory has also gotten better. Now if I can just figure out how to counteract the time I lived at the Dursleys."

"I think I might have found something for that," Hermione confessed. "It was in one of the potion books I looked at from the restricted section. Apparently, a century or so ago, your situation with the Dursleys was not uncommon amongst Muggleborn. A Potions Master by the name of Attila Prince developed the Raggiungere Potion. When it's made right, it reverses years of abuse and neglect on a body. Unfortunately, a couple of the ingredients are restricted."

"What are they?" Harry asked.

"Ground basilisk teeth and Thestral tears," answered Hermione.

Smiling, Harry replied, "Mione, I don't think we'll have a problem with either of those ingredients."

"Where do you propose we find these..." Hermione slapped her forehead. "I can't believe I forgot about the Chamber of Secrets. The basilisk corpse should still be down there as the entrance can only be opened by a Parselmouth, and I remember Hagrid saying the Thestrals that pull the carriages roam near the outskirts of the Forbidden Forest."

"Exactly," Harry agreed. "You up for a nighttime stroll this evening?"

Smiling, Hermione replied, "I would love to go on a stroll with you this evening. Perhaps we can walk by the edge of the Forbidden Forest."

"Quite possibly," said Harry. "Maybe I can show you the Chamber of Secrets as well."

"Perhaps."

They looked at each other and started laughing. Once they had finished training, Harry and Hermione headed back to their dorms to continue their training in Occlumency. After everyone had gone to sleep that night, Harry and Hermione snuck out of Gryffindor Tower.

Chapter 4: Truths and Training

- Headmaster's Office -

Albus Dumbledore's life was good. He had assured himself that his plan for the betterment of the Wizarding world was proceeding as planned. It had all started with one Tom Marvolo Riddle, Jr. If only I had paid more attention while he was attending Hogwarts, Albus thought. I might have been able to head off Tom's path toward becoming Lord Voldemort.

Fortunately, Fate had smiled upon him in the form of Sybill Trelawney. It had been a simple matter of implanting the 'prophecy' in her mind, along with a mental trigger for her to give the 'prophecy' at the proper time. The hard part was to get Severus Snape to overhear the first part of the 'prophecy' so he could report it back to his master. While it was difficult to orchestrate and pull off, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore hadn't been sorted into Slytherin for no reason. A fact the current Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry had gone to great lengths to conceal.

As for a tool to use against Tom, Albus had selected the Potters, as they had publicly defied Riddle and his Death Eaters on several occasions. Knowing they were expecting a child near the end of June, Albus had tailored his 'prophecy' to point at the child as the one destined to defeat Tom. After convincing them to hide under the Fidelius Charm, Albus had their 'good' friend Sirius Black stand as the secret keeper. Knowing where Black's true loyalties lied, Albus was certain Tom would soon know where the Potters were hiding.

Originally, Albus had planned on simply using the Potters as bait in the trap, but he got there too late to save them. To this day, he still is no closer to discovering how Harry survived, but invented a story about Lily sacrificing herself to protect Harry. After binding the boy's magic, so he would be more manageable, Albus left him with the Dursleys. Before leaving, Albus had erected powerful blood wards tied to Harry which would help maintain the Dursleys' vehement attitude toward him. He counted on their hatred of all things magical to make the boy more submissive. He would use this abusive childhood as a way to have Harry see him as a savior, and someone to look up to.

The only thing which had gone wrong with his plan was the financial aspect of it. As Harry's magical guardian, he should have had access to the Potter vaults, so as to make sure they were being handled 'properly'. Unfortunately, the goblins had a different opinion. The Potters had always employed an account manager from Gringotts to handle and oversee their accounts. As such, no other being, save for Harry, could gain access to the files. As Griphook, the goblin in question, was very honorable and took his inherited position as the Potter Accounts Manager extremely seriously, Albus knew that attempting to bribe the goblin would be signing his own death warrant. The fact the goblins already disliked him didn't help his cause.

On a shelf, off to the side of the office, Albus Dumbledore had a variety of silver instruments spinning and puffing small bursts of colored smoke. As Dumbledore was lost in thought, he failed to notice that three of these monitoring devices had changed. Two of them, which were identical to each other, had completely stopped spinning and no longer produced any puffs of smoke, and the third was slowing its spin and producing thinner and thinner clouds of smoke.

Later that same evening, after successfully sneaking out of the castle using the Marauder's Map and Harry's Invisibility Cloak, Harry and Hermione quickly made their way to the edge of the Forbidden Forest.

"I almost thought we had had it back there when Mrs. Norris caught a hold of our scent," Harry whispered as they walked along the edge of the forest to where the Thestrals were known to graze.

"Lucky for us, we made it to a secret passage in time," Hermione agreed.

A few minutes later, they saw the herd of Thestrals. Quietly and with both hands visible and in front of them, the two Gryffindors walked up to one of the Thestrals. As Harry got its attention by softly talking to it, Hermione slowly took out her wand and said, "Aquadrine." As the Thestral's eyes started to water, Harry quickly collected the tears in a glass vial. Canceling the spell, Hermione and Harry both apologized to the Thestral and thanked it for the tears.

I do not mind young Speakers. I have watched you closely during your classes with the tall one, and I can tell that you are both honorable humans.

Both Hermione and Harry froze in their tracks. Both looked at each other and then looked at the Thestral.

"Harry, please tell me you heard that," Hermione asked nervously.

"I did, and I'm glad you heard it to," Harry replied equally as nervous.

Both Gryffindors looked at the Thestral, and asked Did you say something?

Ah, this explains why you've never spoken to us before. Neither of you knew you were Speakers. As it is a rare gift amongst your kind, or so I understand, it is understandable that you were unaware of it, replied the Thestral.

What do you mean by Speakers, Hermione asked.

Is this something like Parseltongue, Harry added.

Similar, but greater, the Thestral answered. While a Parselmouth can only speak to serpents, you two have the rare gift of Beast Speech, which gives you the ability to speak to all animals. The last Speaker I knew was a child here over 200 years ago. She was an orphan, so would spend her holiday breaks here. It was from her that I learned of the going ons in the castle nearby.

After promising the Thestral they would return to talk more, Harry and Hermione quickly headed back to the castle, as they had one more stop to make that night: the Chamber of Secrets.

As they entered the secret tunnel which would lead them back inside the castle, Hermione asked, "Harry, if Beast Speech is as rare as the Thestral said, what do you think it means that we both ended up not only possessing the gift, but we both had our magic bound."

"I'm not sure, but I suspect the two are connected," Harry replied. "I'm now more sure than ever before, we need to keep these things between just the two of us. Someone wants us weakened and constrained. I can think of a few people who would want me

weakened, but not both of us specifically. Not to mention, the ramifications if I am right."

"Out of curiosity, who's on your list?" Hermione asked.

"Voldemort, Fudge, and Dumbledore," Harry replied.

Hermione was about to say something, but given the past years, Harry had a point. "How did Professor Snape stay off the list?"

"Snape hates me for some reason, but he has never hidden this fact from anyone," Harry explained. "The things we've discovered seemed to be done by someone who wants to remain hidden."

"True," Hermione agreed.

Once more under Harry's invisibility cloak, the two headed to the fourth floor girls bathroom. Avoiding the Ravenclaw prefect, who was on patrol, managed to make it to the second floor girls' bathroom and the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets.

As they walked up to the sink, which concealed the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets, Hermione asked Harry to wait a second as she wanted to try something.

Picturing the image of a snake in her minds eye, Hermione looked at the sink and said, Open. At which the sink moved forward and opened up revealing the entrance to the chamber.

"Of course!" Harry exclaimed. "I wasn't speaking Parseltongue during our second year, I was using Beast Speech. But how did I manage it when my magic was still blocked?"

"My guess it was similar to how an average person can lift a car off of a child trapped underneath. In both the case of your duel with Malfoy, and then when you need to get into the chamber, you were extremely stressed, and this allowed your magic to temporarily break free," Hermione theorized.

"Works for me," Harry replied. Looking at the tunnel before them, Harry realized something. Both Voldemort and Salazar Slytherin were known to be well-bred wizards. Given this, then the slide which

led to the chamber didn't make any sense. Looking at the entrance, Harry said Stairs.

Warping in form, the slide molded itself into a set of stairs. "Ladies first, Hermione," Harry stated with a short bow and a wave of his arm toward the stairs.

Giggling, Hermione lightly smacked Harry on the shoulder and said, "Come on you prat, we're burning the midnight oil as it is."

Upon entering the main chamber, the corpse of the basilisk came into view. As Hermione looked on at the 60 foot basilisk, her jaw dropped. Harry had to fight this thing all by himself!

Seeing the look on Hermione's face, Harry chuckled, "Big isn't it?"

Hermione, not trusting herself, simply nodded. They quickly got to work in extracting around twenty-five vials worth of Basilisk venom. Agreeing that they would need to return later and render down the rest of the Basilisk, Harry and Hermione headed out of the Chamber of Secrets and head back to Gryffindor Tower to catch a few hours of sleep.

The following morning at breakfast, Ron came up to them with a smirk on his face. "Hey Potter, look at this," Ron stated as he showed them a gold colored badge pinned to his robes. It said 'Support Cedric Diggory, the True Hogwarts Champion'. Ron pressed the badge and it now read 'Potter Stinks'

Harry simply looked at Ron and started to laugh. After managing to calm himself down, Harry replied, "Given that I haven't showered yet today, I'd have to say that the badge is pretty accurate. Considering that I am participating in this tournament under duress, I'd have to agree, Cedric is Hogwarts' Champion. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to shower before my first class." Ignoring Ron's further attempts at provoking him, Harry left the Great Hall and headed back to the dorms. An hour later, Hermione found him in the Room of Requirement. Saying the place looked like a disaster zone was putting it mildly.

"Feeling better Harry?" Hermione asked as Harry banished the beater's bat he had been using on various pieces of pottery and china.

"Slightly," Harry replied as he slumped into a chair. "Ron's actions this morning pretty much solidified it for me; I don't think he was ever our friend. I hate saying it Mione, but I can't deny what's all happened between us."

"Ron made his decision a long time ago," Hermione stated. "I for one am not going to lose any sleep over it. In my opinion, we are better off without him. I mean look at the facts: you're doing better in your classes without Ron distracting you, and I am not as on edge with Ron's antics and always wanting to copy my homework."

"This is true," Harry agreed. "Well, I suppose we'd better get ready for another 'lovely' day of Potions."

Hermione rolled her eyes at Harry's sarcastic remark, as they left the Room of Requirement and made their way down to the dungeons. Snape was his usual charming self as he introduced Antidotes for Common Poisons. Fortunately, Harry got a reprieve from listening to Snape, as about half way through the class, Colin Creevey came in and told Professor Snape that Harry was needed in the courtyard for the Weighing of Wands.

After getting a make-up assignment from Snape, Harry gathered his things and headed toward the courtyard. As he entered the courtyard, Harry was met Professor McGonagall, who brought him to a tent that had been erected. Before ushering him in, Professor McGonagall stated, "After your wand has been weighed, come back out and I'll take you to where Rita Skeeter is waiting to interview the contestants."

"Thanks for helping me ma'am," Harry replied.

"It's no problem at all Harry," Professor McGonagall said with a rare smile. "I will always take care of my cubs. It may not seem like it at times, but I'm always watching out." Since our 'beloved' Headmaster chooses to turn a blind eye to things, I'll be damned if I let his negligence harm my cubs, Minerva McGonagall thought to herself.

Noticing an annoyed look cross her face, Harry asked, "Is something wrong ma'am?"

"No Harry," Professor McGonagall replied. "Just a stray thought. Nothing for you to worry about. Now head on in, as they should be expecting you."

Stray thought, my foot, Harry thought to himself as he entered the tent. You looked annoyed about something or someone, and given your previous statement, my guess is someone. After giving Mr. Ollivander his wand to inspect, Harry glanced around at the other people in the tent. It looks like Mr. Bagman is trying to set up another betting pool of sorts, Harry thought. After getting his wand back from Ollivander, Harry headed back outside and followed Professor McGonagall to where the interviews were being held.

It didn't take long for Harry to form an opinion of Rita Skeeter. "Miss Skeeter, if you continue to misquote how I'm answering your questions, then the interview is over."

"There is such a thing as journalistic integrity, in case you didn't know," Minerva McGonagall commented. "Did you perhaps miss that day in journalism class?"

Red in the face, Rita Skeeter quickly vanished her previous notes and took out a regular quill and started the interview over. "Mr. Potter, how do you feel about being selected as the tournament's fourth champion?"

"Miss Skeeter, I would love to know how my name was even entered into the tournament. Contrary to popular belief, I had no hand in getting my name entered. We were told all necessary precautions had been made, but in my honest opinion, I'd say they fell short on their claim. How else could the name of a fourth student, who was also under the age requirement, get entered when the goblet was only to choose one student from each of the three schools."

"Who would do something like that?" Rita asked, already liking the way this interview was going. May be the truth is more fun, she thought.

"I honestly don't know, but I'd love to know the answer to that question myself," Harry replied.

After ten more minutes of questions, Rita Skeeter thanked Harry for his time and answers, and headed toward the gates of the school.

After thanking Professor McGonagall for standing with him during the interview, Harry headed to the Great Hall for lunch. Fortunately, Ron was absent at lunch which suited both Harry and Hermione, who had joined him shortly after his arrival. They enjoyed a pleasant lunch together, occasionally chatting with other members of their house. Things took a turn for the worst when Malfoy came up to where we were sitting, and said mockingly, "Hey Potter. I hope you've made out your will. A pathetic half-blood like you doesn't have a chance at making it past the first task."

As Harry had gotten used to Draco's taunts, he merely replied, "Better a pathetic half-blood, than an inbred idiot. Tell me something Malfoy, are you promised to marry your 2nd cousin or your 3rd."

Taken back, and insulted by this remark, Draco whipped out his wand and said, "Frendo Autus." With that, a grayish beam shot out of his wand and headed for Potter. Hermione, who immediately recognized the curse, stepped into the path of the curse and let it hit her. Harry looked towards Malfoy with cold look on his face as Hermione's front teeth began growing, but before he could do anything in retaliation, Hermione simply grabbed his shoulder and said, "Not now Harry, just help me get to Madam Pomfrey before this gets worse."

Nodding to Hermione, Harry turned his back on Malfoy and got Hermione to Madam Pomfrey just before her teeth started to drag on the ground. It only took Madam Pomfrey a couple of minutes to reverse the effects of the curse, and let Hermione leave. As they were walking out, Hermione smiled and said, "I'm going to have to thank Malfoy some how. That curse gave me the perfect excuse to get my teeth shrunken to a more normal size than they were."

"What was wrong with your teeth before, Mione?" Harry asked.

"Nothing really," Hermione said with a slight blush. "Just a touch of girlish vanity."

Deciding that it was in his best interests not to continue with that line of questioning, Harry simply pulled Hermione into a quick hug, and gave her a kiss on her forehead. Smiling, Hermione nestled her head into Harry's chest as he hugged her. After a couple of minutes, the two Gryffindors separated and headed off to Ancient Runes.

As their Ancient Runes class was working on their group project, Harry and Hermione headed to the library to continue their research into the Fidelius Charm and the Ogham rune system. They also continued researching new spells and advanced magic they would practice later that evening in the Room of Requirement.

During their research into advanced magic, Harry came across a book titled *Elementalism: The Path of Nature*. Intrigued, he began taking notes from the book. Apparently, being able to harness the power of an elemental force was, while not rare, an uncommon gift. It apparently was primarily seen as a hereditary gift, although it was known to skip generations. The currently heard of elemental forces included the traditional ones such as earth, air, fire, and water, along with forces such as lightning and shadow. The book went onto describe simple exercises, combined with a complex potion that would reveal whether or not a person was attuned enough to an elemental force to be able to harness it. After taking notes on the exercises and the potion details, Harry pointed the book out to Hermione. "Hey Mione, this looks like something that could be useful for us."

Looking at the book and at the notes that Harry had taken, Hermione replied, "I agree Harry. If we had an elemental ability then that would definitely give us an advantage. From your notes, the potion doesn't look too complicated to do, and as we are already working on Occlumency, these exercises should be fairly easy for us. The only question I've got is where can we brew the potion without anyone knowing about it. Remember, Ron was involved with the Polyjuice Potion two years ago, so Myrtle's Bathroom wouldn't work."

"I'm thinking the Chamber of Secrets would be an ideal place for it, as we are the only two that know where it is, and can get in," answered Harry.

"Your right," Hermione explained. "It would be perfect for us to use. We should also do some exploring down there to see if there are any other secrets either Salazar Slytherin or Tom Riddle left behind."

Harry agreed with Hermione about exploring the Chamber of Secrets. If they cleaned the place up, it would be a perfect place for them to work in secret. As their Ancient Runes class was ending

soon, the two of them quickly finished up their proposal for their Ancient Runes project. This done, they gathered up their notes, and followed their classmates, who also had been researching in the library, back to the classroom.

Professor Babbling was impressed with their proposal, and agreed, given the extra resources they had access to, it was more than an acceptable project. She also stated that if they managed to get a working model of their idea, then she would be more than willing to help them write up a dissertation on it, as the theory behind a runic version of the Fidelius Charm would definitely be something worth publishing.

After sending Dobby out to get the necessary ingredients for the Elemental potion, Harry and Hermione went down to the Chamber of Secrets. They spent the rest of the day cleaning and exploring the chamber. While they didn't find anything valuable, they did find a complete potions lab. Both Harry and Hermione agreed it would definitely come in handy.

The next morning, during breakfast, the Daily Prophet was delivered and the article written by Rita Skeeter definitely caused a reaction. Rita Skeeter had taken the Ministry and Dumbledore to task about the lax security around the Goblet of Fire which allowed Harry to be entered into the Tri-Wizard Tournament. There were more than a few howlers directed towards Dumbledore in the Great Hall, something which caused both Harry and Hermione great amusement.

As it was Friday, neither Harry nor Hermione had classes, so they decided to spend the day in the Chamber of Secrets. While Hermione got the Elemental Potion started, Harry began working on the target dummies the two of them had learned to create from one of the books Dobby had procured for them. After setting up the dummies, Harry started out with simple hexes and began to work his way up to the more lethal curses such as the Bone Crushing curse, the Cutting Hex, and the Bludgeoning Hex. Hermione soon joined him in practicing against the target dummies. Since they had started training, the two of them had managed to cast all of their spells from their first year all the way to third year. Once they figured out the concept of Silent Casting, their ability quickly progressed.

"Hey Hermione, I was doing some reading on the theory behind Wandless Magic the other day, and essentially the concept is fairly simple," Harry mentioned while they took a break from casting to rest and check the Elemental Potion. "The first thing the wizard or witch needs to do is to connect with their magical core. Once this is done, they simply need to learn how to call upon their magic and focus it into the desired end result."

"Sounds similar to the starting exercises for Occlumency," Hermione replied.

"That's what I thought," Harry agreed.

Deciding to try it, as they had a few hours before needing to continue with the Elemental Potion, they both got comfortable, and began the process of finding and connecting with their magical cores.

- Harry's POV -

As Harry turned his thoughts inward, he soon became aware of a greenish glow up ahead of him. As he got closer, the glow began to take a definite shape. As he approached it, he was reminded of the pictures of a black hole he had seen in his old Muggle school. As he approached his magical core, he began to feel energized and more alive than he had ever felt. Now that I've found my magical core, I need to figure out how to connect with it. Not coming up with anything else, Harry simply walked into his magical core.

- Hermione's POV -

As Hermione turned her thoughts inward, she soon became aware of a light reddish-brown glow up ahead of her. As she got closer, the glow began to take a definite shape. As she approached it, she was reminded of the pictures of the Sun that she had seen in her old Muggle school. As she approached her magical core, she began to feel energized and more alive than she had ever felt. Well that was easier than I expected. I've managed to locate my magic core, now I need to find a way to connect with it. After thinking of and dismissing several ideas, she simply decided to try the most simple option, Hermione simply walked into her magical core.

While Harry and Hermione were on their inner journeys, which to them seemed like only several minutes had passed, Dobby had

"popped" into the chamber with lunch for them as he knew they were prone to forget such things if they became involved in their studies. About thirty minutes later, both Harry and Hermione snapped out of their trances.

"Wow!" they both managed after a couple of minutes.

"I feel like I've stuck my finger in a light socket," Hermione replied giggling.

"I know, I feel energized and alive," Harry agreed.

After checking the Elemental Potion, Harry and Hermione started to practice with Wandless Magic. They decided to take it slowly, and started with first year spells.

- Slytherin Common Room -

I never thought I'd live to see the day when a Weasley was relaxing in the Slytherin Common Room of their own free will, Ron thought with a chuckle. I don't know what's more amusing; the fact I lived to see it, or the fact I am the Weasley in question.

"What's so funny?" Draco asked as he contemplated his next move in the game of Wizard's Chess he and Ron were playing.

"What's my last name, Draco?" Ron asked with a smile.

"Weasley," replied Draco curiously. "What of it?"

"Where are we?" Ron continued.

"The Slytherin Common...Ahhh, I see your point," Draco agreed chuckling. "What would your family say?"

"My dear mother would probably die of the shock...hmm."

Chapter 5: Chaos, Elements, and Tasks

- Slytherin Common Room -

As Draco and Ron continued their game of Wizard's Chess, the other Slytherins watched as they mentally tried to grasp what was happening: A fourth year Slytherin from a well connected Pureblood family, was playing a game of Wizard's Chess against a fourth year Gryffindor in the Slytherin Common Room and no hexes or insults were being thrown. Those who knew the two students in question were seriously wondering if the world was ending, or if someone had slipped something into their food.

It was somewhere in the middle of their fourth game when Professor Snape entered the Common Room. The Potions Master stopped abruptly at what he saw, Draco and Ronald Weasley not only in the same room and being civil, but are playing Wizard's Chess together and seem to be enjoying themselves. After watching for a few minutes he cleared his throat. Looking up the two noticed the Potions Master for the first time.

"Hello sir," Ron replied. "Draco and I were having a few games of Wizard's Chess. I'm glad he challenged me to a game. If I'd known he was this good, I'd have challenged him to a game years ago."

"And the reason why a Gryffindor is in the Slytherin Common Room?" Professor Snape asked with a sneer.

"No offense intended sir, but where else would a Gryffindor and a Slytherin be able to play a game of Wizard's Chess in peace?" Ron asked respectfully.

Severus opened his mouth to make a retort, but then closed it as he had to admit that Weasley had a valid point. He simply nodded and headed back to his private potions lab.

- The Chamber of Secrets -

While Ronald Weasley continued down the path of Pureblood Supremacy, Harry and Hermione had managed to work their way through practicing their new found skill of Wandless Magic up to their third year. As it was nearing the time that the Elemental Potion

would be completed, and they both felt it would be wise to rest prior to taking it.

"Hey Mione," Harry asked as they were resting. "I was thinking, it seems to me any wizard or witch is capable of some amount of Wandless Magic. I mean isn't that what accidental magic really is: uncontrolled Wandless Magic.

"If that's the case, why convince people a wand is needed to perform magic?" Hermione asked in a curious tone.

"I can think of four good reasons," replied Harry with an annoyed look on his face. "First it helps to level the playing field as some wizards and witches are more powerful than others. A wand allows those of weaker power to cast the same spells as those of greater power, albeit a weaker form of some of them. Secondly, if the Ministry convinces people they need a wand to use their magic, then the Ministry can render them powerless by taking their wand."

At this point Hermione's jaw dropped, but let Harry continue. "Third, according to my reading, wands are how the Ministry can track underage use of magic. Apparently, all new wands have a tracking charm put on them by the wand-maker which wears off when the user comes of age. In the case of second hand wands, like Neville's, the charm is discreetly put back on the wand when the person enters school for the first time. Lastly, if a wand is used anyone can see what the last few spells the user cast."

Hermione was dumbfounded, Harry was right. She couldn't come up with one single argument against any of his points. "Why would the Ministry do such a thing?"

"Complete control over the magical world," Harry answered disgustedly. "The Ministry at its basic level, is all about control. If they can control who can use magic, and to what extent, then it's easier for them to hold onto their power."

As it was time to finish the Elemental Potion, they decided to finish the discussion later. After placing two doses of the potion off to the side to cool, they bottled the remaining portion and stored it in one of the cupboards they had found in the potions lab. While the two remaining doses of the potion were cooling, Harry and Hermione began to prepare for the simple ritual that would reveal if they had

any affinity to one of the elements and open that connection if it existed.

To begin, both Harry and Hermione stripped down to their undergarments. About half a second later, they were both thankful for their Occlumency skills. They then took a freshly made quill and using ink, especially made for the purpose, drew an array of runic symbols all over each others bodies. After this was done, they each took one of the vials containing the Elemental Potion, and after sitting in a relaxed position, downed the potion.

- Harry's POV -

As Harry began the chant described in the book, his Occlumency training took over and he was soon centered inside his mind. As he continued to chant, Harry's surroundings changed. The landscape started to darken and blur together. The shadows began to grow and merge into a growing black mist rising from the ground. I should be worried about this mist, but it feels right and if I didn't feel so clear headed, I'd worry about that as well. Well it worked when I was connecting with my magical core, I don't see why it wouldn't work here. Making his decision, Harry boldly walked forward into the black mist. All at once Harry knew he had made the right choice. As the black mist swirled around him, Harry felt at peace and whole. As the mist drew closer, it drew up upon itself and crashed down onto Harry, and he fell backwards and saw nothing.

- Hermione's POV -

As Hermione began the chant described in the book, her Occlumency training took over and she was soon centered inside her mind. As she continued to chant, Hermione's surroundings changed. The landscape started to lighten and blur together. Suddenly the ground caught on fire, and soon Hermione was surrounded by a ring of fire. That's strange, I can feel the fire's warmth but it doesn't seem to be burning anything; I wonder? With this thought in mind, Hermione plunged her hand into the fire. Instead of burning, the fire danced around her hand and flowed up Hermione's arm and soon engulfed her. As she was being engulfed in flames, Hermione felt at peace and whole. Shortly after the flames had engulfed her entire body, Hermione fell to her knees and saw nothing.

Gasping for air, Hermione and Harry woke from their potion induced trance with a start. "Whoa. That was amazing," Harry exclaimed.

"I know," Hermione agreed. "I feel like I've found a missing part of myself. I haven't felt this good since we last kissed."

Blushing, Harry replied, "I wouldn't be opposed to seeing if we could top it."

Turning bright red, Hermione playfully smack Harry in the shoulder. "Prat," she said jokingly. "Which element do you have a connection to?"

"Shadow," Harry replied. "You?"

"Fire," answered Hermione. "Now we just need to learn what we can do with the connection."

"The book mentions what the commonly known abilities are, but it doesn't go into how to use any of them," Harry stated. "My guess is that we're going to have to do some experimentation."

Cleaning up after resting for a bit, both Harry and Hermione agreed their training was about to get more intense. Not only would they be continuing with their Wandless Magic, Occlumency, and advanced spell-work, now they would be training in the use of their newly discovered elemental gifts. The two Gryffindors left the Chamber of Secrets hand-in-hand and headed to the kitchens for a bite to eat, as they had no wish to be bothered by Ron yet again.

- Leaky Cauldron -

Tom was experiencing a slow day at the tavern, so when a stranger walked in, he was more than happy to make himself available. "How can I help you sir?"

"Do you have any rooms available?" the man, who appeared to be in his thirties, asked politely.

"We've got a few left, sir," Tom replied. "How long were you interested in renting one for?"

"As I'm going to be here a while, I'd like to start out with two months and after that we'll see."

"Not a problem at all, sir," replied Tom. "That will be 63 galleons, and you'll need to sign the register."

Passing the coins over to Tom, the man opened up the register and signed his name. After getting the key from Tom, the man thanked him and headed up to his room.

Looking down at the register, Tom read the name Dari Àrmann; Interesting name he thought as he went to put the galleons in the safe until he had a chance to get to Gringotts.

As Tom was putting away the galleons, Dari Àrmann was in the process of taking out several trunks out of his pockets and enlarging them. Next, he began to pull out several bookshelves and other pieces of furniture and the like. A couple of hours later, Dari Àrmann was pleased with how his room now looked, as such he changed into clothes that would not stick out so much in this part of the Wizarding world. After pulling a multicolored cube out of one of his trucks and placing in one of his pockets, Dari Àrmann headed downstairs and entered Diagon Alley.

The first place Dari Àrmann headed was to Gringotts, where he would need to take his vault off lock-down status. As he walked though Diagon Alley toward the bank, Dari Àrmann overheard several of the patrons talking about the Tri-Wizard Tournament currently being held at Hogwarts. I'll have to look into that tomorrow, he thought as he approached the bank. As he stood before the immense building he read the notice on the doors the goblins had placed there for all to see.

Enter, stranger, but take heed

Of what awaits the sin of greed

For those who take, but do not earn,

Must pay most dearly in their turn.

So if you seek beneath our floors

A treasure that was never yours,
Thief, you have been warned, beware

Of finding more than treasure there.

Glad to see they haven't lost their touch, Dari Àrmann thought as he chuckled. He looked around the interior of the bank as he entered. I see they've made a few improvements in the last century, Dari Àrmann thought as he walked up to a teller. Speaking in Gobbledegook, the language of the goblins, he asked "Would it be possible, honorable teller, to speak with Heartfang, as he is the account manager for the Àrmann family."

The goblin initially shocked that not only did the wizard speak in the goblin tongue, but his pronunciation was almost flawless, quickly hid his astonishment and replied, "Place your right thumb on the pad."

Understanding the identification procedure, Dari Àrmann placed his thumb on the pad in front of him, and after feeling a small prick, he removed his thumb and waited for the goblin to compare the results with his records.

Upon reading the results of the test, the goblin teller's eye bulged. "My apologies Lord Àrmann, I should have known it was you."

"Nonsense," Dari Àrmann replied with a smile. "With as many ways as there are to impersonate another, you did exactly what you should have done. If I had a choice of either verifying who I am every single time I come here, or risk the chance of someone impersonating me comes in, than I'll choose verifying my identity every time. This is why I trust Gringotts to handle my finances; security and honor."

Bowing slightly, the goblin teller took Dari Àrmann to a waiting room off to the side and told him that Heartfang is currently in a meeting with the Senior Council, but would be notified of his arrival as soon as the meeting gets out. Dari Àrmann stated that was perfectly acceptable and took a seat and relaxed while he waited.

As he waited he went over things in his head. As near as I can figure it, the two spoken of in the prophecy are currently attending Hogwarts, which poses a problem due to Albus "I Know What's

Best" Dumbledore being the Headmaster. I'll have to be careful around the manipulative old goat. Though this Tri-Wizard tournament should provide enough of a distraction for me. Once I pinpoint who these two are, I'll have to find a way to introduce myself and explain what I've discovered. Hopefully they haven't been too brainwashed by Dumbledore. Prophecy or no prophecy, they deserve to make their own choices. They'll need to have both eyes open and alert if they are going to succeed in what ever they chose. I can't make the same mistake Emrys made with Arthur, that blunder cost Arthur his life, not to mention Gwen and Lancelot.

About forty minutes later, the door opened and an older looking goblin walked in. Dari Àrmann immediately got to his feet and bowed slightly saying in the goblin tongue, "Account Manager Heartfang, it is an honor to see you again. May your gold increase and prosper."

"May your gold also increase and prosper and it is indeed good to see you old friend," Heartfang replied with a toothy smile. "I still find it amazing that you look as young as you did a century ago."

"It's a kind of magic," Dari Àrmann replied with a mysterious smile. "Old and nearly as ancient as the world itself."

"If your aura wasn't so bright and strong, I'd swear you were deep into the dark arts," Heartfang jokingly accused. "As soon as I heard you were here and wanting to see me, I sent word to have your vault taken off lockdown and should be accessible by the time you are ready to visit them, or at least they'd better be."

"Knowing how efficient and productive goblins pride themselves on being, I have no worries there," Dari Àrmann replied. "Besides filling me in on the status of my account and investments, I was wondering if you could give me an uncensored version of what's been going on in this part of the world in the last century. I'm aware of the situations with the last two self-styled Dark Lords, but I am curious as to what has been happening besides the obvious, and I trust your people's version of things before my own. Goblins, I have found, value Truth above all, whereas humans in power try to shield those under them from certain truths, whether it be for good reasons or bad."

Giving a deep belly laugh, the goblin known as Heartfang couldn't help but continue to admire this human. While goblins distrusted and disliked humans as a general rule, there were those among that

arrogant race that rose above such putrid values and strived to do what was right for all beings, not what was easy or solely beneficial to humans. As such, Heartfang had no moral or business problems with giving him the information he had requested. After about an hours worth of talking, Dari Àrmann gave his leave, and left Gringotts.

- Hogwarts Library -

After getting something to eat for dinner from the kitchen, Harry and Hermione headed to the library to continue their research for Ancient Runes. At this point, they hadn't found anything specific they could use, but they had managed to learn quite a bit about the underlying properties of the Fidelius Charm. While Hermione did some research in some Arithmancy texts, Harry concentrated on delving deeper into the workings and uses of the Ogham. Shortly before the library closed for the evening, Harry and Hermione gathered up their notes and returned the books to their proper shelves. After which, they headed toward the Room of Requirement for some training before calling it a day.

As they were passing by the entrance to the Gryffindor Common Room, Neville and Ginny came out of the portrait hole. "Hey Neville, Ginny, what are you two up to?" Harry asked.

"We're heading down to the Greenhouses to work on Herbology," Ginny replied quickly. "Where are you two off to?"

"Just out walking to clear our heads, after studying for our Ancient Runes project," Harry answered.

Neither group believed the others story, but simply smiled, as they each went their separate ways. Shortly after parting company with Neville and Ginny, Harry and Hermione entered the Room of Requirement and got started working on some advanced spell-work usually reserved for seventh year students. As they practiced their spell work, they focused on both offensive and defensive uses for most if not all the spells they were working on. During one of their breaks, they each had claimed a chair and were studying their own copy of Elementalism: The Path of Nature, more specifically they were reading more in depth about their particular elemental affinity.

Nervous about bringing it up, as Hermione knew Harry didn't like talking about his times with the Dursleys, she timidly asked, "Harry, I was wondering when we should brew the Raggiungere Potion."

Harry put his book down and sighed. "As much as I would like to get the potion brewed as soon as possible, it would raise too many questions," answered Harry. "At this point, I think the safest bet would be for it to be brewed during the summer break as explaining the results would be easier to deal with."

"I hadn't thought of it that way, but you've got a good point," Hermione agreed. "We still don't know who was behind the blocks, nor who had your name entered into the tournament. Until we have more information, I think you're right, we'll need to play our cards close to the chest, as it were."

"Exactly," Harry replied. "By the way, what have you learned about your affinity to Fire?"

"Besides basic manipulation and creation of fire, the book lists known abilities possessed by others with the affinity to Fire," stated Hermione. "The abilities the book lists are Flashing, Inner Flame, Healing Touch, and Fire Bolt. Flashing is a near instantaneous method of magical transportation similar to that of a phoenix. The Inner Flame is the ability to withstand extreme heat. This includes dragon fire if the elemental is powerful enough. The Healing Touch is a boosted version of your basic first aid charm. While it won't regrow limbs, it will heal most wounds and neutralize poisons. The more pronounced or lethal the wound the more energy it takes to heal. The Fire Bolt is a combination of fire creation and manipulation. It creates a bowling ball sized ball of fire that can be launched at a target. What did you find out about your element? It was Shadow right?"

"Correct," Harry confirmed. "Like with all the elements, I can manipulate existing shadows into different shapes and even solidifying them to perform simple tasks such as tripping someone or opening a door. Besides this the book also lists four common abilities shown by the few people known to have an affinity for the element. The abilities listed are Shadow Walking, Shroud, and Shadow Bolt. Shadow Walking is basically like your Flashing ability, except I would be traveling through the shadows. The Shroud ability

apparently makes me invisible except for my own shadow. The Shadow Bolt is essentially a bolt of energy-draining matter."

"You mentioned four common abilities," Hermione asked curiously. "Why did you only list three of them?"

Sighing and chewing on his bottom lip, Harry softly mentioned, "Dementor's Aura was the fourth one."

Understanding Harry's worry, Hermione went over to her boyfriend and gave him a tight hug. "That doesn't make you evil, ya know," Hermione reassured Harry. "What is the aura supposed to do?"

"It creates an aura of despair and misery in a localized area. Unlike a true Dementor's aura, if a person is strong enough in Occlumency, they can lessen the effects," Harry explained.

"Not to sound morbid or anything," Hermione commented, "but logically thinking, it could come in handy when facing multiple opponents."

After considering it from this point of view, Harry had to agree with Hermione's point. With that they decided they should head to bed as it was getting late. To their surprise, the Room of Requirement suddenly provided a bed for them; the key phrase being a bed.

Blushing, Harry said, "Think the room is trying to tell us something, Mione?"

"I don't think we're quite ready for that step, yet," Hermione said with a blush. Come off it girl, you want to share a bed with him and you know it. 'Quiet you. Neither Harry or I are ready for this step.' Ever hear of pajamas? 'True, that is a good point.'

While Hermione was having her internal argument, Harry was having one of his own. What were you thinking, the room could be meaning that. 'Why not, you still don't know everything about this room. For all you know it could be implying exactly that.' True, this whole castle has been a nexus for magical activity for centuries, who knows what could have happened in all that time, not to mention what the Founders did when they built Hogwarts.

"Although it would be a shame to waste a perfectly good bed," Harry stated. "After all the room must have had a reason for it."

"True," Hermione agreed. "And it's not like we would be naked or anything, we'd both be in pajamas."

With this said, the two transfigured their robes into pajamas and crawled into the large bed the room had provided. Cuddling up to each other, the two Gryffindors were soon fast asleep.

- Diagon Alley -

Shortly before exiting Gringotts, Dari Àrmann cast a powerful Notice-Me-Not charm over himself. As he wandered through Diagon Alley the main topic of conversation was the Tri-Wizard Tournament. It's no surprise everyone is talking about the tournament. Given the fact, it hasn't been held in over a century, everybody is wanting to know every little detail about the tournament and champions themselves. Weaving in between other people and avoiding the street merchants, Dari Àrmann soon came upon the entrance to Knockturn Alley. Walking steadily through the twists and turns of the alley, Dari Àrmann came upon Borgin and Burkes. Canceling the Notice-Me-Not Charm as he was entering the shop, Dari Àrmann began to look around at the various items the store owners had out for sale. Nothing a good dose of Fiendfyre could fix, he thought passing by several items malevolent in nature. A few minutes later, a dingy looking man, introducing himself as Mr. Borgin, appeared.

"What can I do for you sir?" Mr. Borgin asked.

"I'm new to the area, and was told by a colleague of mine you were the man to speak to about selling unique and questionable items," Dari Àrmann replied as he quietly cast a mild compulsion charm to trust him on the store owner. Not needing a wand definitely has its advantages, he thought as the charm to affect.

"Your colleague was correct, sir," Mr. Borgin stated with pride. "Out of all the store owners in Knockturn Alley, no one has the breadth of knowledge about artifacts that I do. I also, via a magical oath, guarantee the best prices and quality merchandise."

"I am glad to hear that," Dari Àrmann replied. "I have an item, which I believe you might be interested in." Taking out the multicolored

cube from his pocket, Dari Àrmann held it out for Mr. Borgin to see. "This is an ancient puzzle box I discovered in my travels through the Orient. It is, in reality, a key which opens a portal to the Netherworld. Upon solving the puzzle, the key is activated and a doorway to the Netherworld will open. In the hands of an accomplished wizard, great knowledge can be wrested from the dead."

"If it's so powerful, why sell it?" Mr. Borgin asked suspiciously. Even a Compulsion Charm couldn't override his sense of business.

"That's easy," Dari Àrmann explained. "I've already learned all I can from the dead, thus the puzzle box is of no more use to me."

Given the nature of such artifacts, this reasoning was plausible to Mr. Borgin. For the next few minutes, the two men negotiated back and forth as to an acceptable price. Eventually agreeing on 100 galleons, the two shook on the exchange and Dari Àrmann left the shop, but not before redoing the Notice-Me-Not Charm. As he exited Knockturn Alley, he thought to himself, Recipe for Chaos: one part Muggle puzzle, one part Fiendfyre Spell held in stasis until the puzzle is solved, one part strong Compulsion Charm to solve the puzzle as soon as possible, and a generous helping of Wizarding curiosity. Mix well and leave the vicinity as soon as possible. Satisfied with what he had set in motion, Dari Àrmann returned to the Leaky Cauldron and retired to his room for the day.

- Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry -

During the following days at Hogwarts, Harry and Hermione got into a routine. Every morning they would get up early and run laps and work on the weight machines provided by the Room of Requirement. After eating a decent breakfast, they would attend their classes for the day and spend the remaining parts of the day either researching material for their Ancient Runes project, practicing their spell-work, or learning to control their newly discovered affinity to their respective elemental power. They also made sure they spent time just being teenagers and being with their few friends.

The two skills they would practice regardless of the day were their growing prowess in Occlumency and Legilimency. As the two skills went hand-in-hand, Harry and Hermione decided to work on them in conjunction. As such, they continued to grow closer and closer together. Soon November 24 rolled around and it was the day of the

First Task. Classes were canceled for the day, as most of the professors were busy helping with the tournament in one form or another.

It was just a under an hour before the contestants were to meet on the Quidditch Pitch to take part in the First Task of the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Harry and Hermione were relaxing by the Black Lake, spending time together before the First Task. "Harry, I'm worried about the First Task," Hermione mentioned with a scared expression on her face.

"There's nothing to worry about, Hermione," Harry replied giving Hermione a tight hug. "We've been training in every possible way we could come up with. Regardless what the First Task is, I don't think I can be any more prepared."

"True," Hermione reluctantly agreed. "I do feel better knowing you managed to figure how to Shadow Walk. Being able to escape into the shadows definitely cuts down on the possibility of being cornered or trapped."

"It'll definitely come in handy, especially since we aren't old enough to Apparate yet. It's also nice to know that it'll work inside Anti-Portkey and Anti-Apparation wards." Chuckling, Harry commented, "I still remember when we figured out our respective travel methods. I don't think Mrs. Norris will ever be the same."

Hermione laughed as she remembered the incident from a couple of days ago.

- FLASHBACK -

"Come on Hermione," Harry called out. "That blasted cat is gaining on us."

"I'm coming Harry," Hermione replied right behind her boyfriend. "Where did that bloody cat come from?"

"Beats me," Harry commented as the two Gryffindors hurried through the halls. They had snuck out of the dorms to get a snack from the Kitchen, and were seen by Flich's cat when they left the kitchen to head back to Gryffindor Tower. So now, the two of them were running from the cat as they knew Flich was more than likely

right behind her. "That's it, from now on I'm keeping the Marauder's Map with me all the time."

"Less talking, more running," Hermione suggested.

Unfortunately, in their desire to get away from their pursuers, the two Gryffindors managed to run themselves into a dead end.

"Bloody hell," Harry replied as he looked around. "Now what."

Hearing Flich calling out to Mrs. Norris in the distance, the two realized they'd better come up with something quick or they were both in trouble. Looking around Harry's gaze was drawn to one of the torches flickering off to the side, casting shadows on the wall.

"Hermione, how are you coming with Flashing."

"From what little I've managed to find, I understand the theory behind the process, but I haven't tried putting any of it into practicing."

"As a Muggle once said, 'No time like the present'," Harry replied. "You can do it Hermione. I have faith in you." With this said, Harry pulled Hermione into a reassuring hug.

Working up her courage, Hermione said, "Alright here it goes, I'm going to try Flashing to the entrance to the Room of Requirement. Hermione closed her eyes, and Harry could see a look of concentration appear on his girlfriend's face and suddenly she vanished in a flash of fire.

- Hermione's POV -

Hermione closed her eyes and visualized her destination. In this case, standing in front of Barnabas the Barmy's tapestry. Once she had the image firmly in her mind, she called upon her affinity to Fire, similar to when she was manipulating existing fire. She channeled her magic into the image of her destination, and willed herself there. In a flash of fire she disappeared, and reappeared standing in front of the tapestry. Cool it worked! Hermione thought to herself. A few seconds later, Harry walked out of a shadow near her.

Just as Hermione disappeared, Mrs. Norris caught up with her prey. Howling loudly, Mrs. Norris informed her human where the student out of bounds was. Knowing it was now or never, Harry concentrated on the shadow created by the flickering torch. Drawing upon the skills he learned while training in Occlumency, Harry willed himself to merge with the shadow, leaving a confused Mrs. Norris trying to figure out what just happened. Linking it to the Floo network, Harry visualized the shadows around the entrance to the Room of Requirement. Seconds later, Harry stepped out of a shadow off to the right of Hermione. Deciding not to chance meeting anyone else in the hallways, Harry and Hermione had the Room of Requirement provide a place for them to crash for the night. Suffice to say, they both got teased by Neville, Ginny, and the Twins, in regards to where they were.

- END OF FLASHBACK -

Smiling at the memory, Hermione's mood lightened a bit. While they were far from being as skilled as they had hoped to be by this time, she knew that Harry was well prepared for the First Task, whatever it may be, and they would just be getting better by the time the Second and Third Task came around.

At this point, the two decided to head over to the Quidditch Pitch as it was getting close to the start of the First Task. As they reached the Quidditch Pitch, they saw that coming up from the ground at the center of the pitch was a huge cavern. Kissing Harry for luck, Hermione headed to the stands to sit by Neville and Ginny, while Harry headed toward the cavern where the other contestants were waiting for the start of the First Task.

"Hey Harry," Cedric said as Harry walked up. "Any idea what's up with the cavern?"

"No clue Cedric," Harry replied. "Although it looks like Mr. Bagman is heading this way. My guess is we'll be finding out shortly."

"Welcome everyone to the Tri-Wizard Tournament," Ludo Bagman stated, after magically amplifying his voice. "For the First Task in the tournament, each of the four contestants will need to enter the cavern and make it through to the other side. There are Charms and Enchantments woven throughout the cavern to slow the contestants down. The contestant who makes it through the fastest will be

awarded 50 points. The next fastest will be awarded 40 points, and so on. The judges have randomly chosen the order in which the contestants will go. First off is Fleur Delacour of Beauxbatons. Next is Harry Potter of Hogwarts, followed by Victor Krum of Durmstrang. Cedric Diggory of Hogwarts will be the last contestant to attempt the cavern."

As Fleur was the first up, she drew her wand from her robes and entered the cave. At this point, all the remaining contestants could do was wait. Thirty minutes went by when suddenly a call came out from the other side of the cavern. Fleur had made it through safely. She looked ragged, but alive.

It was then Harry's turn to go. Drawing his wand he entered the cavern. When he entered the cavern he found himself in a large opening. The cavern itself was made of a blackish rock. He could barely see the exit off in the distance, and knew it was not going to be easy. Harry immediately put up his Occlumency Shields. Holding his wand high, as he did not know if he was being monitored, Harry called out, "Solas Rabhaidh." A bright green light erupted from his wand and began to grow and circle the inside of the cavern. As it circled, the light spread out until the whole cavern was bathed in the bright green light.

As Harry continued to walk cautiously toward the exit, he noticed the temperature was starting to drop. He soon felt the tell-tale pressure in his mind signifying that someone or something was trying to enter his mind. Reinforcing his Occlumency Shields, Harry continued forward in the direction of the exit. Suddenly, the ground began to shake and up from the earth came two bear sized scorpions. Upon seeing Harry, they immediately came after him. Needing some time to formulate a plan, Harry pointed his wand at each of the giant scorpions and cast the Impediment Curse. This managed to slow the scorpions' advance, and allowed Harry to get a better look at them. Harry quickly noticed that these were not true scorpions as they appeared to be made out of the very earth itself. Harry smiled as he now knew how to defeat them. Pointing his wand at the nearest scorpion, Harry called out, "Aguamenti". A jet of water shot out of Harry's wand and struck the scorpion in its front legs. As Harry predicted, the jet of water began to turn the legs into mud and break apart. Harry continued to cast the charm all over the scorpion, and watched the Golem gradually melt away. Harry then proceeded to do the same thing to the other scorpion.

Picking up the pace, Harry was soon within running distance of the exit. About a hundred yards from the exit, a sphinx melted out of the very walls of the cavern and planted itself right in the way of the exit. Eying Harry, the sphinx called out, "This thing all things devours: Birds, beasts, trees, flowers; gnaws iron, bites steel; grinds hard stones to meal; Slays king, ruins town, And beats high mountain down."

I have got to thank Hermione for insisting I read JRR Tolkien's books, Harry thought. Looking up at the sphinx, Harry bowed to the majestic creature and said, "Honorable sphinx, the answer to your riddle is Time."

The sphinx nodded its head and retreated back into the walls of the cavern. With this, Harry ran the remaining hundred yards to the exit. As Harry was checked over by Madam Pomfrey, he was told that he was currently in the lead at fifteen minutes. Once he was cleared to leave, Harry rejoined the other contestants and waited for both Victor and Cedric to finish.

After another hour had past, Cedric exited the cavern which signified the end of the First Task. In the end, the final scores were Victor Krum at fifty points, Harry Potter at forty points, and both Fleur and Cedric were tied at thirty points. After reminding everyone the Second Task would be held on February 24, Ludo Bagman officially closed the First Task, and people started to leave. Harry quickly found Hermione and embraced her in a tight bear-hug. After giving Hermione a passionate kiss on the lips, Harry quietly stated, "One down, two more to go."

Chapter 6: Dancing and Developments

After the First Task was completed, Headmaster Dumbledore invited everyone into the Great Hall for a celebration feast in honor of the four contestants and their completion of the First Task. As much as Harry and Hermione wanted to spend time alone, they both realized that they needed to be at the feast, so as to not draw suspicion from anyone. Sitting by Neville and Ginny, Harry shared with them the First Task, albeit an edited version, as he did not want to reveal his true abilities to anyone just yet. Hermione knew Harry wasn't telling them everything, but she let it go, as she knew that he would tell her later when they were alone.

On the other end of the table, Ronald Bilius Weasley was seething with hatred. Bloody Potter thinks he's better than anyone else. He's a disgrace to his Pureblood name, hanging out with that Mudblood Granger. They need to be taught to respect their betters, Potter is only a half-blood due to his blood traitor father diluting the noble Potter bloodline by taking a mudblood as a wife. While Granger is admittedly smart and knows her stuff, she'll never be as powerful as a true Pureblood. The only thing she's good for is breeding stock for one of the lesser Pureblood families, Ron thought. The only problem is coming up with something to put them in their place, and divert the blame onto someone else. After thinking on it for a few minutes, Ron had devised a plan that would either work, or the blame would not fall on him if it failed.

At the staff table, Albus Dumbledore was feeling very pleased with himself. Even with the setback of Harry Potter being forced to participate in the Tri-Wizard Tournament, his plan was still on track. It turned out Harry's entry into the tournament was an added bonus to his plan, as it caused a rift between Harry and the young Weasley boy. While being friends with Ronald Weasley was beneficial to Dumbledore as it gave him a way of keeping tabs on his pawn, their breakup would be useful in limiting Harry's contact with the Wizarding world during the holidays. Albus wasn't worried about Harry's friendships with Neville and Ginny. Molly Weasley would be easy enough to convince the Daily Prophet would mislead the public if it was discovered that Harry and Ginny were communicating over the holidays at a such young age. As for Neville, Augusta Longbottom did not associate with Muggles, not that she had anything against them, and would not look kindly if Neville was Owling Harry at a Muggle Residence.

The only one that might be a problem would be the Granger girl. As she also lived in a Muggle home, she would be able to send messages to Harry via the Muggle post which Dumbledore could not easily manipulate. Albus would have to make a discreet visit to the Dursleys and reinforce his compulsion charm on them to keep treating Harry as they have been and to make sure he stayed isolated. Unfortunately, for Dumbledore, as he was so wrapped up in his thoughts, he missed out on hearing Professor Babbling's conversation with Professor McGonagall. Bathsheda Babbling was quietly mentioning, so as to prevent Severus from hearing it and giving the Slytherin students an unfair advantage, the idea Harry and Hermione had for their final project in Ancient Runes.

Harry and Hermione are trying to develop a runic version of the Fidelius Charm! Minerva thought to herself, amazed at the high goal her cubs had set for themselves. Then again it's those two. Hermione has always pushed herself to be the best she can be, and ever since Harry started to taking Hermione seriously, I've noticed his grades and study habits have drastically improved. The fact he isn't being dragged down by Ronald Weasley's lazy habits, probably has something to do with it as well. Maybe Harry's name coming out of the Goblet of Fire did produce at least a few good things. I believe if those two are allowed to fully develop their potential, they stand to be among the best wizards and witches of their generation, if not the best. With that thought in mind, Minerva vowed to make sure Harry and Hermione had that chance. As she had a gut feeling the headmaster did not have their best interests in mind, she would have to tread carefully.

Over at the Slytherin table, one Draco Ares Malfoy was deep in thought. Things are coming along well with Weasley. He has finally embraced the proper attitude for a Pureblood of his status, and he is receptive to the Death Eater way of thinking. I'll have to admit, for a Gryffindor, Ron has a cunning all his own. Everyone who looks at him sees a thickheaded fool, when in reality he uses that image to fool people into letting their guard down. I wonder how he ended up in Gryffindor instead of Slytherin? I'll need to write to cousin Sirius, and see if he can advise me on how to proceed with leading Ron toward the Dark Arts.

In the library that evening, Harry and Hermione were doing more research for their Ancient Runes project. While Harry was going

through an ancient tome on the Druids and their beliefs, he decided to ask Hermione about something he had been thinking about. "Mione, I've been thinking," Harry stated. "From all I've read lately, I've come to the conclusion there really is no such thing as Light Magic and Dark Magic. Sure there are some things out there that are truly evil and could corrupt you, but over all magic is neither good or bad. It's all on the intent of the wizard. For example, you can use the levitation charm to kill by sending someone over a cliff, and you can use the Killing Curse to painlessly end someone's life who is dying a painful and irreversible death."

Hermione just stared at Harry for a minute, before realizing what he said made a lot of sense. "You have a point Harry," Hermione agreed. "As it's the Ministry who classifies what is Light and what is Dark, I bet they simply label anything they view as too powerful or threatening to their power as Dark."

"Exactly, which makes me think we shouldn't dismiss the so called Dark Arts out of hand," Harry continued. "I think in the end, we'll need every advantage we can get."

"We'll have to be careful, but I agree," Hermione said. "Professor Moody is always saying sometimes you have to fight fire with fire."

With this, they decided during Christmas break they would see what they could find out in regards to the Dark Arts. Until then, they would concentrate on continuing their current training regime. Shortly before the library closed, Harry and Hermione packed up their notes they had taken and headed toward the Room of Requirement.

- Borgin and Burkes -

Mr. Borgin was getting excited, as he had almost succeeded in solving the puzzle box he had acquired earlier that week. With the knowledge I can gain from the dead, I will be able to increase my power and finally be able to gain some real respect amongst the dark wizards. Soon all my dreams will be fulfilled. He had been working feverishly on the puzzle box anytime he wasn't open for business. The thought of gaining power and respect filled his every waking thought.

About an hour later, Mr. Borgin ecstatically moved the last piece of the puzzle box into its proper place. As the piece clicked into place,

the cube started to glow a deep sooty red color and began to vibrate and hum. A second later, it lifted out of Mr. Borgin's hand and started to spin rapidly around itself glowing brighter and brighter. Suddenly a blast of Fiendfyre erupted from the cube in a stream of flame. Mr. Borgin escaped from being torched by virtue of an emergency Portkey he always wore around his neck. Unfortunately, his shop was a ready source of fuel for the cursed flame as it soared around the shop consuming everything in its wake to use as fuel. The resulting explosions from various dark artifacts only seemed to spur the Fiendfyre on. Seeking out more fuel, it burst through the shop window leaving the shop to burn on its own.

By the time Aurors arrived to contain and banish the rampaging dark magic, the Fiendfyre had consumed two other shops in Knockturn Alley. Tracking the flame back to its source, the Aurors made their way through the remains of Borgin and Burkes. After finding no trace of Mr. Borgin, physically or magically, the Aurors called in a cleanup crew to handle the remains of the dark artifacts their diagnostic spells revealed and sent in a missing persons report on Mr. Borgin.

Unfortunately, or fortunately depending on your point of view, the Aurors failed to notice the small reptilian humanoid hiding in the shadows.

Back at the Leaky Cauldron, Dari Àrmann sensed his Fiendfyre Curse had been released from the Stasis Charm. That should distract the both the Aurors and Knockturn Alley's more frequent visitors for a while. As the for minor fiend which was set free from its prison, either the patrons of Knockturn Alley will banish it back to the Abyss, or the Aurors will eventually pick up on its existence after it has grown in power in a couple of days, he thought as he put a book back on his bookshelf. I don't like using beings of the that particular plane as they can cause more trouble than their worth, but in this case I believe things will work out on their own.

- Hogwarts -

The day after the First Task, things returned to normal at Hogwarts. Harry and Hermione continued with their training schedule. While the two felt they could trust Neville and Ginny, they decided to hold off on revealing what they had discovered because they couldn't be sure their secrets would remain safe. There were too many ways for information to be gotten from someone unknowingly.

The next morning at breakfast, Harry and Hermione were reading the Quibbler, as neither would acknowledge the Daily Prophet as a respectable newspaper, when they came across an interesting article.

Knockturn Alley Aflame

by Fredrick Alastair

This reporter, through sources in the Auror Department, has learned that a few days ago, several shops deep in Knockturn Alley were completely destroyed by Fiendfyre. At this time it is unknown what the cause of the conflagration was, but it is known both the dark fire originated in Borgin and Burkes, and it's proprietor Mr. Borgin has gone missing. When asked about the possibility of Mr. Borgin dying in the fire, sources confirmed that this option had been completely ruled out.

The remaining proprietors of Knockturn Alley have stated that anybody giving information leading to the apprehension of Mr. Borgin would be given a 100 galleon reward. They feel his disappearance and refusal to come forward speaks volumes about Mr. Borgin's guilt in this matter.

As I get more confirmed information on this incident, this reporter will continue to keep you updated.

"I wonder who or what caused the Fiendfyre to run through Knockturn Alley?" Hermione wondered aloud to Harry.

"I'm not sure," Harry replied. "But the other shopkeepers are blaming Mr. Borgin for the damage it caused."

"How ever it started," stated Hermione, "I'm glad it was contained before it spread any further. I read that Fiendfyre will continue to burn as long as it can find a source of fuel."

"The fact that it is supposedly semi-sentient makes it all the more dangerous," added Harry.

Ignoring Ron's snide comments about reading the Quibbler, when it was common knowledge The Daily Prophet was the only paper

worth reading. The Quibbler just had the outrageous ravings of a senile man, where the Prophet had actual news articles about what was really going on in the real world. Commenting on the foul odor coming from Ron's direction, Hermione suggested to Harry that they head off to class before the stench started to cling to them. Loudly agreeing with her suggestion, Harry took Hermione's hand and the two of them headed off to their first class of the day.

By the end of the following week, both Harry and Hermione had mastered casting all of their spells through the fifth year curriculum both Wandless and Silent. They still needed their wand for the more advanced spells and such, but they continued to practice. They also had succeeded in harnessing all of their elemental abilities. Now they simply needed to hone their skill through practice. Out of all the elemental abilities, Harry's Dementor's Aura was the trickiest one to practice. Harry decided, with a mischievous grin, to warn Hermione he was going to try it out in their Potions class. At first Hermione was against it, but given Professor Snape would be bias toward the Slytherins anyways, it wouldn't make much of a difference. The results were impressive.

About half way through the class, Harry quietly let Hermione know he was going to call up his Dementor's Aura. Sure enough, the temperature in the room began to drop and their fellow students were starting shake and a couple of them started crying as the wave of despair continued to wash over them. While Hermione was protected due to her Occlumency skills, she still felt the chill crawling over her. To hide their knowledge of what was going on, both Harry and Hermione acted as if it was affecting them as well. Satisfied that he understood how this ability worked, Harry reigned in the power and the room returned to normal. Snape decided to let the class out early as several of the potions being brewed started to react violently due to brewing mistakes. He also needed to figure out what had caused the emotional reaction amongst all of the students.

On December 10th, the students were given a surprise. During Transfiguration, as the students were practicing cross-species switches, Professor McGonagall got the students' attention. "Class, I have an important announcement to make," Professor McGonagall stated. "To coincide with the Tri-Wizard Tournament being held at Hogwarts, there will be a Yule Ball at the school on the 25th of December. Fourth year students and up are strongly encouraged to

attend to show support for their school. Due to the suddenness of this event, the Headmaster as declared this weekend will be a special Hogsmeade weekend to allow students to prepare for the ball. Any detentions which have already been scheduled for this weekend, will be rescheduled for the following weekend."

This announcement earned quite a few cheers from the female part of both the Slytherins and the Gryffindors. The male part of the class for the most part groaned. Calling for the students' attention, Professor McGonagall continued, "As a side note, I have been informed Madam Malkin of Diagon Alley will have a temporary shop set up for this weekend only. She stated as her colleague, Horris Gladrag, is currently at St Mungo's due to a case of Dragon Pox, she would be more than happy to provide her services to the students of Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, and Durmstrang."

As class was ending, Professor McGonagall asked Harry to stay behind for a moment. As Harry knew he hadn't done anything wrong, this time, he was curious as to what Professor McGonagall wanted.

Walking up to her desk, Harry asked, "What did you want to see me about, ma'am?"

"As you heard in class, we are going to be having a Yule Ball this month," Professor McGonagall started. "As a champion, forced or not, it is your responsibility to find a date for the ball. Also, you and your partner, along with the other champions and their partners, will participate in the opening dance."

Harry immediately paled at the mention of him having to dance. Minerva McGonagall smiled as she thought, He doesn't think twice about risking his life to protect someone, but tell him he needs to do something as simple as dancing with a girl, and he's scared to death.

"Harry," Minerva said gently, placing a hand on his shoulder, "I take it from the 'kill me now' look you have on your face, you don't know the first thing about dancing. Plus, you want to make this Ball special for Hermione."

Harry just nodded. "That obvious?"

"With the exception of Professor Sprout and Madam Pomfrey, only to me," Minerva said smiling. "As for the dancing, I would be more than happy to teach you."

"Thanks Professor," said Harry with obvious relief in his voice. They quickly worked out a schedule for him to come to her office and learn some basic dance steps. As Harry left the classroom, he saw the Hermione was waiting for him. Walking up to Hermione, he asked, "Hermione Granger, would you do me the honor of attending the Yule Ball with me?"

Her face lit up, as Harry had asked her in front of several people, including two of the most notorious gossips. "I would love to Harry," Hermione replied as she walked to to him and hugged him tightly. While most of the students suspected the two of them were going out, neither of them had openly admitted it. By dinner, this incident would be known by all the students and would verify Harry Potter and Hermione Granger were an item.

At dinner, after congratulating both Harry and Hermione, Neville confessed he had asked Ginny to the Yule Ball and she had said yes.

"Congratulations Neville," Harry exclaimed. "I think you two are great for each other."

"I agree," stated Hermione. "Just be careful around Ron. He's been a little volatile lately."

"A little?" Neville replied with a laugh. "I'm not worried though. I've already told Ron about it, and informed him as Ginny has already said yes, then he can either deal with it, or take it up with her, as I wasn't changing my mind."

Hermione groaned, "Please tell me Ron kept his mouth shut."

"It's Ron, Mione, I doubt it" commented Harry. "Did Ginny tell you what she did to him?"

"Apparently, Ron was smart enough not to bring it up with Ginny," Neville replied. "Unfortunately, he wasn't smart enough to realize trying to get Fred and George to do something about it, is almost as bad."

"Oh Merlin," Harry and Hermione said in unison as they both shook their heads at their former friend's stupidity. "That would explain why he wasn't in class earlier." Harry surmised.

"I met up with Ginny earlier, and she told me the twins had just informed her what had happened," replied Neville. "She was still livid about it. I suspect Ron will be receiving a Howler from Mrs. Weasley within the next couple of days."

Both Harry and Hermione cringed at this, as both were familiar with Mrs. Weasley and her Howlers, as the Twins usually got at least one a month.

Ron finally made an appearance for dinner, although he glared at Neville throughout most of the meal. It wasn't until Ginny entered the Great Hall and walked up to her brother. Ron paled as Ginny quietly whispered something in his ear. "You didn't," Ron pleaded.

"Not only did I, but I'm sure the Twins also wrote to mum as well," Ginny replied with a smirk and headed to the opposite end of the table to sit by Neville. While Hermione and Ginny discussed the Yule Ball, Harry and Neville talked about the Herbology assignment which was due next week.

That weekend saw a mob of students, from all three schools, descend on Hogsmeade. While Madam Malkin was the most popular, the other shops were also visited by the students. Deciding to wait until the crowd had thinned at Madam Malkin's shop, Harry and Hermione first headed to Scrivenshaft's Quill Shop, as they both need to restock on quills and parchment due to the extensive research they had been doing. They then met up with Neville and Ginny at The Three Broomsticks for lunch.

"So, have either of you braved Madam Malkin's yet?" asked Harry.

"Not yet," Neville replied. "We've been to Zonko's and Honeydukes. We were going to head there after lunch."

"How about the two of you?" inquired Ginny.

"Not yet," Hermione replied. "Harry and I figured we'd try after lunch."

"What can I get the four of you?" Madam Rosmerta asked as she walked up to their table.

"Butterbeer," all four replied.

After finishing their lunch, the four Gryffindors left the pub and headed over to where Madam Malkin had set up shop. Fortunately, they had managed to get there when the line was relatively short, so they did not have to wait long.

Letting Hermione and Ginny go first, Neville and Harry took a seat and chatted while they waited. "So how long have you and Ginny been going out?"

"Only for about a couple months," Neville replied. "We've found we've got a lot in common, like our love for Herbology and the need to prove ourselves for who we are, not because of someone else."

"I know what you mean," Harry agreed. "Besides a few people, all anyone sees when they look at me is this blasted scar."

Nodding, Neville asked something which had been bugging him for a while. "Harry, do you know what's up with Ron lately?"

"Besides being a narrow minded, backstabbing git?" Harry asked. "Hermione and I talked about it, and we've come to the conclusion he's always been that way. As far as we can tell, Ron thinks everything he wants should just be given to him, without any work on his part. He used Hermione for her homework, and me for my blasted fame."

"I hate to say it," Neville sighed, "but I think you're right about Ron. He's only out for himself, and everyone else is just someone for him to use to get what he wants."

"On a more light-hearted topic," said Harry wanting to change the subject. "What exactly did the twins do to him?"

Chuckling, Neville replied, "I don't know the details, but it involved mixing up his limbs like a jigsaw puzzle."

"Ouch," Harry replied. "I take it the twins are tired of Ron's antics as well."

"That's my guess," answered Neville. "I didn't ask Ginny for details, as I don't think I want to know."

"Wise move, given the twins and Ginny," Harry nodded.

A few minutes later, Hermione and Ginny emerged from the shop and headed toward the bench Harry and Neville were at. Hermione came up to Harry and told him it was his and Neville's turn, and Madam Malkin knew they were going together, so would make sure his robes would match the gown she had chosen. "That's a relief," said Harry. "I figured, I would let Madam Malkin choose something appropriate as I don't know the first thing about dress clothes."

"From what you've told me about your relatives," Hermione said with an irritated tone to her voice, "I'll believe it. I had the same problem, but Madam Malkin helped me pick out something appropriate and tasteful."

With that, Harry gave his girlfriend a quick kiss and headed into the shop right behind Neville. "Ah yes, Mr. Longbottom and Mr. Potter. The young ladies that were just here stated that you would be next. Given both of your statuses in the Wizarding World, I have taken the liberty of pulling out a few designs that both befit your stations and will complement the ladies gowns. After handing each of them a folder, Madam Malkin directed them to a table off to the side where they could sit and go through the selections she had picked out.

- Honeydukes Sweetshop -

Ron was glad Dean and Seamus had left to visit Zonko's. He was finally alone, so he could take a look at the package he had received. He knew it was from Sirius Black, as Draco had confirmed it was his seal on the package, keyed so only Ron and Draco could see it. Draco had explained to Ron that he had written his cousin explaining Ron had realized the truth and was looking for a fellow Gryffindor's opinion on things.

Opening up the package, Ron found an old book that appeared to be a journal of some sort, but when he tried opening it, it remained

closed. Probably charmed to open only under certain conditions. Along with the journal, there was a letter.

Ronald Weasley,

From what my cousin writes, you are the first Weasley in three generations to understand and accept the Pureblood way of thinking. I'm glad to know the Weasley Family isn't entirely without merit. This journal belonged to your Great-Uncle Artus Weasley. He was a high ranking and powerful member of the Knights of Walpurgis. This order of dark wizards and witches were the devote followers of the Dark Lord Gellert Grindelwald, much like the Deatheaters are to Lord Voldemort. Shortly before his capture in 1945, Artus entrusted this journal's safe keeping to my father Orion Black. Artus told my father the journal was to be given to the next member of the Weasley Family who followed the true path. As such, I now fulfill my father's promise and return your Great-Uncle's journal to you. As with you, he was also sorted into the Gryffindor House, so as you can see, you have several things in common with him. May this journal provide the answers you are looking for. In order to key the journal to you, simply let a drop of your blood touch the journal. The blood will be absorbed into the journal and if you are found worthy, the journal will then open for you and you alone.

Sincerely,

Sirius Black

Head of the Ancient and Noble House of Black

As the letter crumbled into dust, Ron grinned so widely it would put the Cheshire Cat to shame. This is a book I will be reading very carefully, Ron thought to himself. Making sure no one was looking, he took out his knife and made a tiny cut on his thumb and let a drop of blood fall onto the journal. As soon as the drop hit the journal, the book glowed blue for a second as the blood was absorbed into it. Flipping through the book, he saw besides simple journal entries, the journal contained spells and what appeared to be potion instructions. I am definitely going to have to do something nice for Draco, in thanks for writing to Sirius.

- Madam Malkin's -

Going through the designs given to them, both Harry and Neville eventually decided on which one they liked. After giving Madam Malkin their choices, they were measured and then informed their robes would be sent to them within the next few days. Thanking her for the dress robes, the two Gryffindors left the shop to meet up with Hermione and Ginny at Zonko's Joke shop.

Seeing the girls browsing through some of the joke items, Harry and Neville headed over to them. "Hey you two, staying out of trouble?" Harry asked with grin.

With a look of mock shock on her face, Ginny replied, "Are you implying Hermione and I would be getting into trouble?"

"Implying no," answered Harry with a lopsided grin. "Flat out saying. Ginny, you take after the twins way too much to claim that type of innocence. As for Hermione, given who she hangs around with, we were bound to rub off on her eventually."

Both the girls tried valiantly to look offended at Harry's statement, but after a few seconds they couldn't help but laugh. After looking around the shop for a bit, the four of them headed back to Hogwarts. Back at the castle, Neville and Ginny headed to the library as Ginny had a test in Charms on Monday, and Neville had agreed to help her study. Harry and Hermione headed off to the Room of Requirement to continue with their physical training and to continue studying the material for their sixth year. They had managed to cast all of the spells from the sixth year curriculum Silently, but were still working on mastering them without their wands.

After awhile, they decided to take a break and, after cleaning up, they headed down to the Great Hall for dinner. They immediately started to worry as Ron was nowhere to be seen, and to their knowledge he hadn't done anything to upset Ginny or the Twins. Sitting down next to the Fred and George, Hermione asked, "You two wouldn't happen to know why Ron is actually missing a meal?"

"No, we don't," answered Fred.

"We were hoping you would know," continued George.

Both Harry and Hermione shook their heads. "Given what Katie told us earlier," replied Fred, "this doesn't bode well."

"What did Katie tell you?" asked Hermione.

"She warned us that she had seen Ron coming out of the Slytherin Common Room, a couple of days ago and was laughing with both Draco and Theo," answered George.

At this both Harry's and Hermione's jaw dropped. Seeing their stunned looks, Fred continued, "I know we didn't believe her either until she swore a Witch's Oath she was telling the truth and it wasn't some sort of prank."

"Given his attitude toward you and others," replied George, "we think he's starting to turn into someone worse than Percy."

"The way Ron's been acting," stated Harry, "I can't say I'm surprised he is hanging around Draco and Theo. I've caught Ron a couple of times almost saying Mudblood, before catching himself and saying Muggleborn instead."

It was now Fred and George's turn to look stunned. Looking at Hermione, not believing what they had heard, Fred and George's eyes turned cold as Hermione nodded her head confirming what Harry had said. "Will you excuse us," asked Fred, "we need to go speak with Professor McGonagall about using the Floo connection in her office."

"We don't dare do anything as we don't trust ourselves right now," George explained. With this, the Weasley twins got up from the table and headed out of the Great Hall.

"That went well," Harry said sarcastically.

"At least they realized it would be bad for them to do anything," Hermione pointed out.

"True," agreed Harry.

"Do think Ron is turning out like Draco Malfoy?" Hermione asked.

"From what we've heard from others and seen for ourselves," Harry stated, "I think he is. We'll have to be on our guard around him."

"Fortunately," Hermione pointed out, "the term ends next week, and as Ron has decided to shun us, he'll more than likely go home for Christmas Break. This gives us a couple of weeks peace, save for the Yule Ball."

"Assuming the git has managed to find a date for the ball," chuckled Harry.

Finishing their dinner, Harry and Hermione headed up to the Gryffindor Tower, as they knew they had to keep up appearances.

The time leading up to the end of term went by quickly for Harry and Hermione. Besides their classes, they continued their training and spending time together. Often times, they would forgo training for an evening and simply relax in the Room of Requirement away from everyone else. It was during these times, they got to know each other better. While Harry talked of his time with the Dursleys, Hermione told of her years doing everything she could to gain her parents approval and eventually giving up. She turned to her books and decided at a young age since her books were the only friends she seemed to have, she would learn as much as she could from them. She confessed to Harry meeting him on the train four years ago was the best thing that happened to her. Harry had pulled her into a hug, and told Hermione that she was his first true friend.

Aside from sharing stories of their times before Hogwarts, Harry and Hermione would also talk about magic in general, and soon came to the definite conclusion that aside from a few charms and such, there was really no such thing as Light and Dark Magic; it was all in the intent of the wizard. What the Ministry labeled as Dark Arts, was simply very advanced magic not everyone could do. The problem was they had no way of learning these forbidden arts. It was on the day before Christmas break, that Harry came up with a possible solution to their problem: Dobby.

"Dobby used to work for the Malfoys, Mione," Harry explained. "As such, he might be able to still get through the wards that are probably protecting Malfoy Manor and raid the library there. If Dobby were to take a few at a time, we could copy the information from them, using the charm you found last week, into the blank books we ordered from Flourish & Blotts."

Thinking about it, Hermione had to admit it was worth a try. Calling on Dobby, they told him what they wanted him to do. Dobby, upon hearing Master Harry and Mistress Hermione were giving him a chance to do something against his old master, began cackling evilly before popping away to start."

"You do realize Dobby is enjoying this way too much," Hermione pointed out.

"I think all those years as the Malfoys' slave has scrambled his brain a touch," Harry agreed.

It took Dobby around a week to go through the Malfoy library. By the time it was all done, Harry and Hermione had around a hundred books on the Dark Arts. As Harry and Hermione went through their new collection of books, they found the topics ranged from blood magic and necromancy to alchemy and potions. Realizing the danger in overdoing it with these advanced arts, Harry and Hermione knew they would need to be careful and take it slow. As such, the two of them decided to intermix their regular training with learning from these new books.

Along with studying and training in the Room of Requirement, Harry and Hermione also spent time with Professor McGonagall learning some basic dance steps. They also got permission from Professor McGonagall to go to Diagon Alley to finish their Christmas shopping, as long as she accompanied them. Thanking her, Harry and Hermione arranged for them to Floo to Diagon Alley on the twenty-third.

- The Burrow -

As Ronald Bilius Weasley sat on his bed reading his great-uncle's journal, he thought being confined to his room, except for meals, for the duration of the Christmas Break, was the best punishment he'd received as it gave him a chance to read the journal in privacy.

I can't believe how far this family has fallen from their true station in the Wizarding world. According to this journal, we used to be a well respected family, until my grandfather aligned the family with Dumbledore's way of thinking. From there it's been a steady decline in power and respect, thought Ron as he read his great uncle's words. Well not this Weasley, I'm more determined than ever to get

back the respect and power I deserve and am owed as a twelfth generation Pureblood. It's time I stop hiding behind this mask of being thickheaded and stupid. If I'm going to succeed in gaining any of the respect I deserve, then it's time I start to show my true colors.

With this decision, Ron read through the journal, pausing only to take notes for further studying later. When classes started up again, Ron would need to start making alliances with people nobody expected a Weasley to associate with.

- Diagon Alley -

After agreeing to meet Professor McGonagall at Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor in one hour, Harry and Hermione, with their hoods hiding their faces, headed toward Gringotts. Shortly before entering the bank, both Harry and Hermione cast a simple glamour over themselves to hide who they were. Upon entering the bank, the two Gryffindors lowered their hoods and headed over to the tellers.

Once it was their turn, Harry asked the teller if they could speak with Griphook. "And why should Griphook want to see you?" replied the goblin.

Deciding to try something, Harry replied, "Honorable teller, my name is Harry James Potter, and it was my understanding that Griphook was still my family's account manager."

The goblin teller blinked in astonishment. Not only was this wizard being polite, but he was being courteous by speaking in the goblin tongue. Quickly recovering, he replied "Please place your thumb on the pad to confirm your identification."

Following the goblin's instructions, Harry placed his right thumb onto the pad in front of him. After feeling a small prick, he removed his thumb. The drop of blood was quickly absorbed into the pad, and after reading some information that appeared on the tablet in front of him, the goblin replied, "Please follow me, Mr Potter, and I will let Account Manager Griphook know that you wish to see him."

After showing Harry and Hermione to a room off to the side, Harry thanked the teller for his assistance. As they waited, Hermione asked curiously, "Harry, where did you learn gobbledygook?"

"The same place you learned Parseltongue," Harry replied with a lopsided grin.

A look of understanding came over Hermione. Smiling, she stated, "That is a useful talent to have."

Nodding, Harry agreed. A few minutes later, a goblin entered the room. Upon seeing this, Harry got up from where he was sitting and went over to the goblin. Shaking his hand, Harry replied, "Greetings Griphook, may your gold increase and flow."

Not showing any surprise, Griphook replied, also in the goblin tongue, "And may yours as well, and, as I handle your accounts, it will. How may I help you today, Lord and Lady Potter."

"I was won...wait a minute did you say Lord and Lady Potter?" Harry asked confused. He understood that goblins would see the life bond he and Hermione shared and view them as married, but what was with the Lord and Lady part?

"Yes I did," Griphook stated with a grin. "While, under normal circumstances, you would not come into your inheritance and thus your title until you reached the Wizarding age of majority which is seventeen. There are exceptions to this rule, two of which pertain to you."

"What would those be?" asked Harry curiously.

"The first one is that as you are the last remaining member of your family line," Griphook explained, "you become of age at fourteen, instead of seventeen. The second one is that you have formed a life bond. While the Wizarding world in general does not recognize this union, we at Gringotts do."

Curious, Harry asked, "Generally speaking, what does my becoming Lord Potter change?"

"Several things," Griphook replied. "The main change is you are now viewed as an adult and are listed as emancipated. As an adult, you now have full access to the Potter Vaults, not just your trust vault. Also, as an adult the underage magic restriction no longer applies to you, and you are allowed to create Portkeys. As Lord Potter, you have the right to bring in and banish people from the Potter Family,

you also have a spot on the Wizengamot, as the Potter Family has a hereditary seat. Now in order for you to gain any of these things, you must formally accept the position as Lord Potter. Anticipating that you would want to assume your role as Lord Potter and as your Muggle guardians would not have access to it, I looked at your official birth certificate and your full name is Hadrian James Potter. You were named after both your father and your maternal grandfather."

Looking at Hermione for any doubts, Harry looked back at Griphook and said in English, "I Hadrian James Potter, son of James Edward Potter and Lillian Marie Potter née Evans, being the last of the Noble and Ancient House of Potter claim my rightful inheritance and head of my house." As soon as Harry finished, a light seemed to shine through him, verifying his claim, before the Potter Family ring appeared on his finger. A few seconds later, a similar ring appeared on Hermione's finger, showing her status as Lady Potter.

"Now before we go into what brought you to Gringotts," Griphook continued, "the Potter Family rings act as a Portkey to Potter Manor, and may become invisible if you so choose. They may only be taken off by the wearer of their own free will. Also, as the Potter Family magic recognizes your union, Lady Potter is also considered an adult, thus receiving the same benefits this entails."

"Well this changes things," Harry commented with a chuckle. "Initially, we just came to draw some money from my account, and add Hermione onto it. Given this development, can I get a list of all my assets, and does Gringotts have anything that we could use to draw money from, so we don't have to keep coming here and taking up your valuable time? Also, it's Harry and Hermione, neither of us are big into titles."

"Your parents said the same thing when they came here," Griphook replied with a chuckle. "In private, I will be honored to use your given names, however, in public it is goblin tradition to use your given titles. As to your request, either of the Potter Rings will be accepted in the Wizarding world as they are linked to your vaults. For the Muggle world, we can issue you both debit cards tied to your vaults. They are backed by a Muggle bank that Gringotts does business with. As to your assets, I've sent for them, so it will be a few minutes before they arrive."

"That would be perfect, Griphook," said Hermione. "Out of curiosity, would there be a way to determine my lineage? Things have happened recently, which make me question what I've been told."

"Of course Hermione," Griphook replied as he conjured a blue colored stone that had a slight glow to it. "Please place three drops of your blood on this stone and we can run a check for minor fee of 20 galleons."

After Hermione let three drops fall onto the stone, Griphook excused himself to go run the test and to retrieve the Potter portfolio.

"Something wrong, Mione?" Harry asked.

"No," Hermione replied. "With everything that has been done to us, it makes me curious as to what else might have been hidden. Also when were you going to tell me about adding my name to your account?"

"Surprise," Harry said with a lopsided grin. "It only made sense to add you to my account, I trust you completely and this way we both have access to the vaults if needed."

Embracing Harry in a bone-crushing hug, Hermione thanked him for his trust.

A few minutes later, Griphook returned with two thick folders and a foul look on his face. "Is something wrong Griphook?" Harry asked with a concerned look on his face.

"I'm going to personally flay Albus Dumbledore the next time he enters this building," Griphook replied with a snarl. "After getting the results of the Lineage Test back, I did some further digging and discovered some improper handling done in regards to Lady Potter's lineage." Turning toward Hermione, he asked, "Were you aware that you were adopted?"

"I'm WHAT!" Hermione exclaimed.

"I'll take that as a definite no," commented Griphook. "According to our records you are the only child of Marcus Sean Connors and Jean Elaine Drake. Your father was a Muggleborn with no discernible magical ancestry, your mother, however, was the last

surviving heir to the Drake Family. The Drake family was a minor Pureblood family, with one notable exception. They were the last direct descendants of the witch known as Morgana LaFey. Our guess is the Drake Family was unaware of their ancestry as they never claimed rights to the LaFey Vault. From our records, we discerned your parents were among those killed in the last war with Lord Voldemort. Our best guess is, whomever found you sent you to a Muggle orphanage where you were later adopted by the Grangers. As headmaster of Hogwarts, Dumbledore would be aware of your lineage as your birth name would appear on the Hogwarts rolls not your adopted name. As such, it would have been his responsibility to inform you of your heritage."

"Griphook," Hermione asked politely, "if it would be possible, I would like to claim my inheritance of the Drake Family and the rights to the LaFey vault. I would also like to add Harry to both accounts."

"I expected you would, and have retrieved the necessary portfolios. For the record, your full birth name is Hermione Jean Drake. As the Drake Family was a matriarchal line, you would be named as the head of the Drake Family, similar to Harry being the head of the Potter Family," answered Griphook.

Nodding her thanks, Hermione stated in English, "I Hermione Jean Drake, daughter of Jean Elaine Drake and Marcus Sean Connors, being the last of the Noble House of Drake claim my rightful inheritance and head of my house. I also claim the rights to the name and lineage of LaFey." As soon as Hermione finished, a light seemed to shine through her, verifying her claim, before the Drake Family ring appeared on her finger and merged with the Potter Family ring already there. A few seconds later, a similar ring appeared on Harry's finger, showing his status as Lord Drake. This ring also merged with the Potter Family ring currently there.

Harry and Hermione noticed while the Potter emblem was shown as the major house on Harry's ring, the Drake emblem was shown as the major house on Hermione's ring. They surmised, and Griphook confirmed, this was due to their Heads of House status.

Realizing they were getting close to the time when they were to meet with Professor McGonagall, the two asked Griphook if they could take the folders with them to look at later. Griphook stated this would be acceptable as these were copies of the original records.

After handing the two their new debit cards, and shrinking the folders for them, Griphook showed them out. After making their rings invisible, the two Gryffindors left Gringotts and headed across the street to Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor and found Professor McGonagall chatting with Professor Babbling. After getting a bite to eat, Harry and Hermione separated to do their individual shopping. Professor McGonagall accompanied Hermione, while Professor Babbling agreed to accompany Harry, this way the two could more easily shop without the other seeing what was purchased.

After their shopping was completed, which was surprisingly done without either Professor seeing how the purchases were made, the four returned to Hogwarts. Upon stowing their purchases in the dorms, Harry and Hermione headed to the Great Hall for dinner. Once dinner was over, Harry and Hermione went to their dorm rooms to wrap their purchases and send them off to their respective places for the holidays, with the agreement to meet in the Room of Requirement to train and discuss what they had learned at Gringotts.

- Gringotts -

Back in his office, Senior Account Manager Griphook was busy filing all the paperwork necessary to handle the changes that occurred when young Harry and Hermione assumed their places as heads of the Potter and Drake families. Due to the extent of their now shared holdings, Griphook was promoted to Senior Account Manager and his sole responsibility would be the handling of these two humans' accounts. He also sent the notifications of their newly acquired adult and emancipated status to the proper department in the Ministry of Magic. Although knowing that department, it would probably just be filed away without anyone glancing at the paperwork. He then put in a work order to combine the Wyllt and Potter vaults, and the LaFey and Drake vaults to make things easier for his two clients.

He also filed an injunction against Dumbledore in regards to withholding information about Lady Drake's heritage, thus causing accounting errors for Gringotts. Not to mention that it would cause trouble for Dumbledore, which was always a good reason as far as Griphook was concerned. He set it up so the injunction paperwork would not be sent until after the end of the school year. Griphook would send a letter to Lady Drake, to inform her of his actions and when the paperwork would be filed with the Ministry.

- Hogwarts -

During one of their breaks in the Room of Requirement, Harry and Hermione decided to go through the folders that Griphook had given them and the revelation of Hermione's true heritage.

"Given that Dumbledore knew of my heritage, yet when I was sorted my adopted name was called, I'm betting he was responsible for putting me in the Muggle orphanage," theorized Hermione.

"That makes sense," Harry agreed. "Following that line of thinking, it would mean Dumbledore was the one who put the blocks on your magical core. Given his interference with my life, I'm betting he was responsible for the blocks on mine."

"I'm thinking your right, Harry," Hermione replied. "We are going to have to be careful around Dumbledore until this summer. We'll have to come up with something else for next year."

Harry agreed. Tabling that topic for later, they pulled out the folders that they had gotten at Gringotts. As Harry was going through the Potter folder, he skimmed through all the paperwork until he found a summary page and read:

Properties

45 Potter Lane, Godric's Hallow, Wales

Potter Manor, Wales (Under Fidelius Charm)

Villa De Potter, Florence, Italy

Grosser Weg 635, Berlin, Germany

3-y Paveletskiy proyezd 19834, Moscow, Russia (Under Fidelius Charm)

Assets

Family Vault: 934 million galleons, various books and items

Trust Vault: 100,000 galleons (replenishes to 100,000 from Family Vault each year, will merge with Family upon reaching age of majority)

Wyllt Family Vault: 6.5 billion galleons, various books and items

Investments

10% share in Quality Quidditch Supplies

30% share in Daily Prophet

10% share in Giovanni's (Muggle restaurant in Florence, Italy)

5% share in St. Mungo's Hospital

14% share in Furian's Potions and Apothecary

12% share in Madam Malkin's Robes for Every Occasion

While Harry was looking through the folder on the Potter account, Hermione was glancing through the folder containing the Drake account. Like Harry, she skimmed through most of the documents until she found the summary sheet. Reading through it, she was amazed at what she now had access to:

Properties

45 Wilshire Lane, London, England

3-y Paveletskiy proyezd 19835 , Moscow, Russia (Under Fidelius Charm)

Assets

Family Vault: 732 million galleons, various books and items

LaFey Family Vault: 7.2 billion galleons, various books and items

Investments

10% share in Quality Quidditch Supplies

53% share in Drax Shipping (Muggle/Wizard Shipping company in Moscow, Russia)

14% share in Mihailov Magical Menagerie (Moscow, Russia)

5% share in St. Mungo's Hospital

Still amazed at what she had read, Hermione commented as she passed the sheet over to Harry, "If I were as lazy as Ron, I don't think I would ever have to work again, and still live very comfortably. This summer, I'd love to visit the vaults and see what books and other items are in them."

"Likewise," Harry commented as he passed his sheet over to Hermione. "Although, I'm going to have to ask Griphook why the Wyllt Family Vault is listed as well as the Potter Family Vault."

Hermione gasped at Harry upon hearing him mention the name Wyllt. "You have access to the Wyllt Family Vault!" Hermione choked out as she scanned the sheet that Harry had handed her.

"Yeah," Harry replied. "Do you recognize the name?"

Nodding, Hermione answered, "Emrys Wyllt was the birth name of the wizard we know today as Merlin."

Harry's eyes bulged out, "Did you say what I think you said?"

Hermione nodded as the two of them realized that they now had control over the vaults of two of the British Wizarding World's most powerful and notorious wizard and witch in history. The ramifications of this fact was not lost on the two Gryffindor students. If word of this got out, they would never hear the end of it. "Do you think Dumbledore knows about this?" Hermione asked.

"I don't think so," Harry replied. "Griphook commented that the Drakes weren't aware of their connection to the LaFey family, and from what little I know about the Potter Family, they tended to avoid the spotlight and worked from behind the scenes. This sounds like something they would have kept to themselves."

"True," Hermione agreed. Looking down at the list of properties Harry now owned she noticed the residence in Moscow. "Hey Harry,

look at the property in Moscow on my sheet. It looks like we have residences right next to each other, and their both under the Fidelius Charm. "I remember reading should the secret keeper of a Fidelius protected property die, the secret reverts to the owner of the said property and the secret is forgotten by those who knew of it previously. It's kind of like a safety feature built into the charm."

"They could come in handy in the future, if we ever needed to lay low for awhile," said Harry.

Agreeing, Hermione and Harry returned the respective summary pages to their folders. After shrinking the folders back down, Harry and Hermione left the Room of Requirement and headed back to Gryffindor Tower to rest for the night.

The next day at breakfast, Harry and Hermione decided to take the day off from studying and training. They spent the morning relaxing in the Gryffindor Common Room reading and Harry even managed to get Hermione to play a few games of Wizard's Chess. In the afternoon, they had a picnic out by the lake, and at Hermione's request, Harry helped her with her flying skills. By the time they ended to get ready for dinner, Hermione had made drastic improvements and had managed to overcome most of her fear of heights. At dinner that evening, Dumbledore announced that students and others would be arriving tomorrow afternoon to prepare for the Yule Ball tomorrow evening, and all the students were to be on their best behavior as they were representing not only Hogwarts at the ball, but Britain itself.

- The Burrow -

"Ronald Bilius Weasley," Molly Weasley yelled up the stairs, "get down here this minute. We're running late as it is!"

Ginny and the Twins did their best to keep from snickering at their youngest brother's misery. Couldn't happen to a more annoying git, Ginny thought as Ron came shambling down the stairs wearing his dress robes. The Weasley Family was taking the Floo to the Longbottom estate to spend Christmas dinner with them. Molly was pleased her daughter had found a good match in Neville Longbottom. He was from a respectable family and seemed like a nice boy, from the few times she had met him.

Both the Weasleys and the Longbottoms aided Dumbledore in the last war, so the fact Ginny and Neville were together was pleasant news for Molly to hear, as it continued the alliance the two families had with each other. Admittedly, Molly would have liked to see Ginny and Harry get together, but she was smart enough to realize love could not be forced. She had learned that hard lesson in her younger days, and fortunately nothing bad came of the incident.

As Ron stumbled down the stairs, he thought to himself, I can't wait to get back to Hogwarts and away from these blood traitors. I'm getting tired of this role of a fool I have to portray. Fortunately, it won't be for much longer. I'm glad I was at least able to convince dad to get me a better set of dress robes for the Yule Ball. I still can't believe Daphne Greengrass agreed to go to the dance with me. Then again, Daphne did say she saw potential in me. I can't wait to see the look on the rest of the Gryffindors faces, when they see me escorting Daphne to the Yule Ball.

- Hogwarts -

Harry was woken up at 7:30am by Hermione jumping onto his bed and screaming, "Wake up Harry it's Christmas!" This of course caused Harry to bolt up in his bed, which lead to Hermione tumbling off the bed onto the floor. Grabbing his glasses, Harry was treated to the sight of Hermione, in a pale blue nightgown, picking herself off the floor as she rubbed her backside as she muttered something about how hard the floor was.

"Now you know, why Ron always used pillows to wake me up before, by the way Hermione, nice pajamas." Harry explained with a smile.

"Nice boxers," Hermione replied with slight blush to her face, as Harry pulled on some sweatpants and a t-shirt.

Grabbing the few packages he hadn't put under the Christmas Tree in the Great Hall, Harry followed Hermione downstairs.

Grabbing a cup of hot chocolate, the two Gryffindors went over to the tree and sorted through the presents. After making a separate pile in front of each of them, Harry and Hermione sat down and finished their cups as they looked up at the tree. After they had finished, they set their cups aside and got down to business. "Well," Harry stated, "I believe it's ladies first."

Grabbing the top package from her pile, Hermione opened up her gift from Ginny. It turned out to be the latest copy of Teen Witch, and a note stating that she now had a one year subscription to the one of the most popular magazines for teenage witches. Smiling, Hermione stated, "Ginny's been after me to loosen up and get my nose out of the books every once and awhile."

Chuckling, Harry opened up his gift from Neville. It turned out to be a portable Foe Glass. The note stated since Harry insisted on getting into trouble every year, then it might come in handy. "Boy does Neville have me pegged," Harry laughed as he showed Hermione the note. "That he does," Hermione agreed.

As they switched back and forth, Hermione also ended up getting a book on magical pranks from Fred and George, a knitted sweater from Mrs. Weasley, and a portable Foe Glass from Neville with a note stating since she was with Harry, two eyes were better than one. Harry ended up getting sweets from Ginny, a variety of pranks from Fred and George, and a knitted sweater from Mrs. Weasley.

After they were done opening their gifts from the others, Harry pulled out his gift to Hermione. When she opened it, Hermione gasped. Inside a small box, lay a simple necklace made up of alternating peridot and emerald gemstones. "Do you like it?" Harry asked nervously.

"Like it," Hermione gasped, "I love it Harry, but you shouldn't have."

"I wanted to, Mione." Harry confessed. "You once mentioned that you always seemed to get practical gifts for your birthdays and Christmas. So for our first Christmas as a couple, I wanted to give you something special that wasn't a book or anything practical like that. When I saw it in the window, I thought of you."

Not knowing what else to say, Hermione simply gave Harry a bone crushing hug. Holding the necklace up, Hermione motioned for Harry to put it on her, which he gladly did. Looking at Hermione, as her face seemed to glow, Harry decided this was the best Christmas he had ever had. Hermione then pulled out her gift to Harry. Taking the gift from her, Harry carefully unwrapped the packaged and opened up the box. Inside, he found a silver plated pocket watch. Engraved on the inside of the cover were the words, To Hadrian

James Potter, From Hermione Jean Drake, Know that my love for you is as eternal as the phoenix flame. "Do you like it?" Hermione asked nervously. "I couldn't figure out what to get you, when I remembered an old tradition of gifting a man a pocket watch when he came of age. It was usually given to him by a loved one."

"Then coming from you, Mione, makes it the perfect gift," Harry said as he gave her a tight hug. While he still had Hermione in his arms, Harry lifted her head gently and gave her a passionate kiss on her lips. Hermione readily returned Harry's kiss with one of her own.

From an unseen alcove, Minerva McGonagall watched as her young cubs celebrated the holiday. When the two opened their gifts from each other, Minerva smiled, Well I'll be, she thought, it appears Harry and Hermione are better at hiding secrets than I thought. When they embraced and kissed, Minerva gasped as she saw them surrounded by a golden glow for a few seconds. Secrets, my tail, Minerva thought. Those two are bloody well life bonded, and knowing Harry and Hermione, they are well aware of it and its meaning. It seems I will need to be having a friendly chat with those two cubs sooner rather than later. Thank Merlin, Albus isn't here, as I know he is able to see auras just as well as I can. Deciding to reveal herself, Minerva came out of the alcove and walked over to where Harry and Hermione were sitting. More specifically, where Harry was sitting on a chair, while Hermione was sitting in his lap.

"Happy holidays, Mr. Potter, Miss Granger," Professor McGonagall greeted them.

"Happy holidays professor," Harry and Hermione replied together.

"I was wondering, as Headmaster Dumbledore is gone for the morning, if I could speak with the two of you for a moment in my office?" Professor McGonagall asked with a stern look on her face.

"Of course professor," Hermione replied getting up from Harry's lap. As they walked behind their head of house, they were both trying to figure out what they could have done as Professor McGonagall didn't look to happy with them.

As they entered Professor McGonagall's office, she closed the door. She then proceeded to cast several locking and privacy wards all around the room. Professor McGonagall then took a seat behind her

desk, and motioned for Harry and Hermione to take a seat in front of her. Once everyone was seated, Professor McGonagall, replacing the stern look with a smile, looked at her cubs and asked, "Well Lord and Lady Potter, is there anything you would like to share with me?"

At this point Harry and Hermione's faces immediately took on the appearance of children being caught with their hands in the proverbial cookie jar. Looking at each other, then back at their head of house, Harry, knowing full well feigning ignorance would not be the wisest option at this point, simply asked, "How did you know?"

"Three things," Minerva replied. "The first was the fact it shouldn't have taken you so long in Gringotts, unless you were doing something other than withdrawing money. Secondly, I am well aware of the tradition of the giving of a pocket watch to a wizard. Finally, I possess the ability to see auras, including that of a life bond. Now before you start to worry, more than you probably are now, I assure you this little detail will not be shared with the headmaster. Officially, it's none of his business, and unofficially I'm finding it harder to trust him as of late."

Both Harry and Hermione breathed a sigh of relief as they both thanked Minerva for her discretion. Holding up her hand, Minerva continued, "Now I know you two are keeping other secrets, but for now I feel they should remain between the two of you, but know this, if you ever need to come to someone about anything, know that I will keep anything you confide in me between us and us alone. Now I do believe there are several hours in the day left before the ball tonight, so I expect to see the two of you enjoying the day and not spending it cooped up in the library."

"Yes ma'am," Harry and Hermione replied. Getting up from their seats, they quickly left the office.

- Diagon Alley -

As Dari Àrmann was eating lunch at the Leaky Cauldron, he relaxed and quietly listened to the conversations going on around him. Besides the usual conversations, the two main topics seemed to be the Tri-Wizard Tournament and the Yule Ball which was being held for the Hogwarts students and the visiting students later that evening. Some of the younger crowd were debating on who would be performing at the ball.

This Yule Ball sounds like the perfect distraction for me to get onto the school grounds and do some snooping around, Dari Àrmann thought to himself. Not to mention the frustration I can cause that manipulative old goat. He needs to see that he is not in control of everything. With this thought in mind, Dari Àrmann finished his lunch and headed back to his room to collect a view things.

- Knockturn Alley -

Drizt was enjoying his new found freedom from the accursed prison that blasted druid had held him in. Now he was free, and whats more he was released in an area that was rife with negative energies to feed on. A couple more days like this, and he would be back to full strength and could start searching for an adequate host to bond with.

- Hogwarts -

That evening, Harry and Hermione had met up with Neville and Ginny when they returned to Hogwarts for the Yule Ball. They thanked both Neville and Ginny for their gifts and gave Ginny a couple of letters to pass on to her family, which she happily agreed to do. At this point, Harry and Neville had finished cleaning up and were dressed in their dress robes, which had arrived from Madam Malkin, and were now waiting by the stairs to the girls' dorm for Hermione and Ginny to finish with their preparations.

"So Harry," Neville asked, "are you and Hermione having a good time spending your break here at Hogwarts?"

"That we are, Neville," replied Harry. "And for the record, we are doing things other than studying, although we are doing studying as well. We've made some decent progress on our final project for Ancient Runes. Mainly, though, we've been relaxing and having fun."

"Something," Neville replied with a knowing look on his face, "you've both been needing for quite a few years. It's nice to see you both enjoying yourselves in something besides school."

Surprised at Neville's keen insight, Harry asked politely, "Okay, where did that come from? Not that I'm offended it's just that you were the last person I expected to hear that from."

Smiling, Neville replied, "I may be quiet most of the time, but I'm also very observant."

Chuckling, Harry had to admit, "That you are mate, I'm sorry I didn't realize what a good friend you are sooner."

"No worries Harry," Neville assured him. "With Ron butting into everything, I can't say I'm surprised."

"I'll have to admit," Harry confessed, "as much as I hate the fact I have to participate in this bloody tournament, several good things have come about because of it."

"That's a good attitude to take, Harry," agreed Neville.

They would have continued but they heard footsteps coming down from the girls' dorm. Turning to look, both Harry and Neville's jaws dropped and all they could say was, "Wow."

Smiling, Ginny turned to Hermione and held out her hand saying, "Pay up girl, I win."

After handing Ginny a galleon, the two Gryffindor girls came down the rest of the way and joined their boyfriends.

Recovering his ability to speak, Harry said, as he placed a corsage on Hermione's wrist, "You look beautiful, Mione."

Smiling at the compliment, Hermione replied, "Thank you Harry, and you look handsome in your dress robes."

Hearing Ginny squeal with delight, Harry and Hermione turned to see that Ginny had opened up a small box from Neville, revealing a simple looking bracelet made of garnets and peridot. "I thought about giving this to you last night when gifts were being exchanged, but Gran suggested I wait until the Yule Ball."

With this, the four headed down to the entrance to the Great Hall where students were gathering before the ball started. A few

minutes later the doors opened and the students poured into the Great Hall. Finding a table to themselves, Harry, Hermione, Neville, and Ginny sat down to eat dinner before the dancing started up. As they ate, Ginny noticed that people would occasionally look over toward them. The four of them paid these people no mind, they simply ate their dinner and chatted with each other. After dinner, the four champions were called to the center of the dance floor to open up the Yule Ball, at this Harry and Hermione excused themselves from the table and made their way to the dance floor, where the other champions and their partners were heading. The lessons the Professor McGonagall had given them paid off, as the two of them danced on the floor.

After the opening dance, other students came onto the dance floor to join the champions. Despite the fact the Great Hall was now filled with dancing couples, Harry and Hermione's world had shrunk down so that it included only them. For the first few dances, the music played was slow and steady, however, after several songs Dumbledore came onto the stage and introduced the main performers for the night: The Weird Sisters. This got a loud and long applause from the students.

It was about half way through the third song of the Weird Sisters' set, that it happened. While Harry and Hermione were dancing to the rock beat of the song, the hairs on the back of Harry's neck stood up on end. Sensing something was wrong, Harry was about to motion to Hermione when he saw out of the corner of his eye, an orange bolt of light streaking toward them from the balcony. Shoving Hermione to the ground, the bolt scorched the ground where they had been standing merely a second ago. At this point, pandemonium ensued, as the students scattered. Drawing upon their training, Harry and Hermione started to scan the balconies as they headed off the dance floor with the rest of the students. At this point the staff was on full alert searching the area. A few minutes later, Professor Flitwick spied someone moving in the balcony area and hurled off a spell in a foreign tongue. A strangled cry was heard from where the spell had landed. Professor Snape and Professor McGonagall ran up to the balcony area to detain the person who was hit by their colleague's spell. A few minutes later, Professor Snape came back down stating the perpetrator had been caught. Professor McGonagall was taking the student responsible to the Headmaster's office to question them.

Assured that the danger was over, the students slowly started to head back to the dance floor. Harry and Hermione used this time to disillusion themselves and headed outside to be alone.

"Well that was a mood killer," Harry commented as they sat down on one of the benches.

"I agree," Hermione stated. "I wonder who it was that sent the spell at us?"

"I don't know, Mione," Harry replied. "Fortunately, the person was caught before anyone was hurt.

"Indeed it was young Harry," a voice said off to the side of them.

Chapter 7: Yule Ball's Aftermath

- Leaky Cauldron: December 24 -

Dari Àrmann had spent the last few days observing the local magical populace and catching up on more recent events. From what I've learned from listening to various people, especially Rubeus Hagrid, the two children I'm looking for are Harry Potter and Hermione Granger. Apparently, they've been in the middle of things since they came to Hogwarts four years ago. From what I learned, I suspect Dumbledore is as manipulative as ever. What he is planning for those two I'm not sure yet, but the old goat won't succeed if I have anything to say about it. The first thing I need to do is get those two out from under Dumbledore's manipulations. Once their free of his control, I can give them an alternate choice to Hogwarts.

After returning to his room to grab two journals from his bookshelf, Dari Àrmann blurred into the form of a peregrine falcon. With a few beats of his wings, Dari Àrmann flew off westward toward Scotland and Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. A few hours later, he landed near the edge of the Forbidden Forest and blurred into the form of a ferret and scampered toward the castle. He spent the rest of the day exploring the grounds and the castle itself, before finding a small alcove near the Great Hall where he curled up and fell asleep.

The following day, Dari Àrmann, under a Disillusionment Charm, kept an eye on Harry and Hermione. While he watched them, he discovered they shared a life bond with each other. They were truly 'two made one'. Dari Àrmann wasn't surprised to find they had the potential to become Archmaguses. From what I've seen of their training, they are well on their way. They surpassed their regular classes and seem to be keeping their true power hidden from everyone. I wonder if they've discovered Dumbledore's true nature?

On the night of the Yule Ball, Dari Àrmann waited outside the castle in one of the courtyards. It was the one closest to the Great Hall, so he suspected if Harry and Hermione went outside to be alone, they would choose this one. Sure enough, a while later, Dari Àrmann saw Harry and Hermione fade into view.

"Well that was a mood killer," Harry commented as they sat down on one of the benches.

"I agree," Hermione stated. "I wonder who it was that sent that spell at us?"

"I don't know, Mione," Harry replied. "Fortunately, whoever it is was caught before anyone was hurt."

"Indeed it was young Harry," Dari Àrmann said with a smile. After setting up privacy and silence wards, he jumped down from the statue of a Griffin he had been perched on.

Startled, Harry and Hermione turned toward the direction of the voice, their wands drawn. Perched on the top of one of the statues in the courtyard, was a man with shoulder length brown hair and a full beard. He was dressed in what appeared to be loose fitting pants and a white tunic. Jumping down from where he was perched, the man slowly came up to them saying, "My name is Dari Àrmann, and it's a pleasure to meet you."

Still holding their wands pointed at the man, Harry asked, "What do you want and where did you come from?"

Chuckling, Dari Àrmann thought to himself, These two aren't very trusting. Then again, from what I've heard around Diagon Alley and the conversations I've had with Tom at the Leaky Cauldron, with what they've had to deal with in the past four years, I can't say I blame them. "Fair questions, however, I'd rather not talk out in the open. Is there any place we can go to talk privately?"

Turning to Hermione, Harry whispered in Parseltongue, "Room of Requirement or the Chamber of Secrets?"

"I say the chamber, as the Room of Requirement would aid him as well as us," Hermione answered after a moment of thought. Turning to the stranger, Hermione replied in English, "Can you remain unseen by others?"

"I can," Dari Àrmann replied. "Also before we go anywhere; I, Dari Àrmann swear upon my life and magic I mean no harm to these two children of magic before me, nor will I lie to them during our upcoming conversation." As he spoke his oath, a blue glow surrounded Dari Àrmann for a second before fading.

Relaxing a little, Harry told the man to mask his presence and to follow them. Upon seeing him fade from sight, Harry and Hermione turned and headed back inside. After managing to remain unnoticed by any of the students or staff, the two Gryffindors quickly made their way up to the second floor. While Harry used the Marauder's Map to make sure the coast was clear, and Dari Àrmann was still with them, they made their way to the girls' bathroom. After locking the door, Harry told Dari Àrmann he could reappear. As he was doing so, Hermione went over to the sink, and whispered the password to the entrance.

As the entrance was opening, Hermione turn to Dari Àrmann and said, "Watch the first step, its a dozy." With that, Hermione jumped into the chute, laughing as she slid down.

"She always did prefer the slide over the stairs, when going down," Harry chuckled to himself. "After you," he said motioning to Dari Àrmann to head down next.

Nodding to Harry, Dari Àrmann followed Hermione down the chute. When he came to the bottom, Dari Àrmann picked himself up, as he saw Hermione waiting for him. A few seconds later, Harry came sliding down. At this point the three followed the tunnel into the chamber ahead of them. Once there, Harry and Hermione brought Dari Àrmann into one of the side rooms, they had fixed up into a common room of sorts.

After seating themselves, Dari Àrmann said, "Very nice place you've found for yourselves. I'm glad to see that Salazar's chamber is being used for more constructive purposes these days. Now as to your questions, I'll begin with a bit about myself and go from there. As I stated, my name is Dari Àrmann and I currently live in a small cottage in a forest about two kilometers outside of Amesbury, Wiltshire in England. For what I do, I am a druid. As such, I am a local healer, priest, and mediator for some of the local towns. The Muggles in the local towns are more opened minded, and several still follow the Old Ways, thus making it easier to conceal my true nature. As to what I want, that is a not so simple matter. It is also why I wanted to speak with the two of you privately, so as not to arouse Albus Dumbledore's suspicions, as I do not trust the old goat."

"What do you have against the headmaster?" Harry asked curiously.

"You mean besides the fact the so called 'Leader of Light' is a lying, manipulative, controlling old bastard?" Dari Àrmann replied.

"I can't speak for Mione," Harry laughed, "but my opinion of you has gone up with that last statement."

Laughing as well, Hermione said, "You won't get any arguments from me."

They're not as naïve as I thought, this makes things easier. "If you don't mind my asking," Dari Àrmann asked, "what did your headmaster do to lose the trust of two Gryffindors?"

"Plenty," Hermione grumbled.

Harry had a gut feeling Dari Àrmann was someone Hermione and he could trust and he had learned to trust his instincts. Not to mention Dari Àrmann stated he was a druid, all the research they had done on their Ancient Runes project showed the druids were known for their sense of Truth and served the people not themselves. Harry, after conferring with Hermione for a minute, went on to explain exactly why they felt that they could no longer trust Albus Dumbledore. Harry decided to leave out the part about how, due to Dumbledore's interference, their home life was.

By the time Harry had finished his tale of deception and manipulation, Dari Àrmann was cursing in several languages. That's it. If I had any doubts about hiding things from these two, this eliminates that option completely.

Composing himself, Dari Àrmann stated, "Given what you've been through, I'm going to completely level with you. First off, around a century ago, give or take a decade, I was given a prophecy by the Celtic Goddess Brigid. I won't go into the exact wording right now, due to time constraints, but it states the two of you would have the power to defeat the two Dark Lords of your time. I was instructed to search the two of you out and make sure you were trained properly to defeat them. However, in light of what you've told me, I am not going to force you to do anything; not that I would anyway. If you choose to learn what I can teach you, it will be by your choice not mine or anyone else, be they god or mortal."

"How long do we have, before we have to make our choice?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "It's not that we don't believe you, given the oath you took, but given what you just told us, it's a bit to take in."

"Completely understandable," Dari Àrmann chuckled. "Given your current situation, I wouldn't expect an answer until after the school year. I'll meet with you, upon your return to London, and we can discuss this further then."

"That's seems reasonable," Harry replied.

Not wanting to be missed by anyone, Harry and Hermione stated they had better return to the Yule Ball, before anyone got suspicious. Before Dari Àrmann left, he gave Harry and Hermione, each a small journal. "These journals contain some basic magical exercises," stated Dari Àrmann. "To be honest, the Ministry would consider these exercises pointless, however, they are necessary to gear your mind and magical core toward the use of a different style magic which was around long before the Ministry. While these are considered basic, they are by no means easy. It usually takes most initiates a few years to master these principles. Given that you already have a strong foundation in magic, and from what I can see of your auras, you've at least started to master your abilities without the crutch of a wand, I'd say if you were dedicated to learning from the journals, you should be able to succeed by the time we meet again." With this said, he faded from view and was gone.

"Well this has been an interesting evening," commented Harry.

"No kidding," Hermione agreed.

After making a final appearance at the Yule Ball, Harry and Hermione headed back to Gryffindor Tower to change out of their dress clothes and into something simpler. From there they made their way to the Room of Requirement.

- Headmaster's Office -

Terry Boot was confused, the last thing he remembered was that he was in the library studying, when he heard someone say, "Imperio." The next thing he knew, he was in the headmaster's office being

questioned by the headmaster, about some curse he supposedly cast.

"Minerva, it appears that while Mr Boot was the one to cast the Cutting Curse, he was not acting under his own free will at the time," Albus Dumbledore replied after asking the child several questions, and checking the fourth year Ravenclaw over with a diagnostic charm.

"You're saying he was under the Imperious Curse?" Professor Flitwick replied. As Terry was one of his students, Filius was concerned for him.

"I'm afraid so," answered Albus Dumbledore. "Fortunately, as such, Mr. Boot will not have any punishments assigned to him, and this will not go into his record as he was not acting under his own volition. Unfortunately, his attacker was smart enough to avoid being seen, so we have no way of determining who it was."

After sending the student back to his dorm, accompanied by Professor Flitwick, Albus Dumbledore sat at his desk and tried to figure out what had happened. While the curse narrowly missed Potter and the Granger girl, given how the students were dancing at the time, the curse could have been meant for any number of people, Albus thought as he sucked on a lemon drop. I better double check the wards and other security measures surrounding the castle. I need Potter alive to lure Tom out of hiding. He may only be a wraith, but there are plenty of ways for Tom to regain a body. Once Tom reveals himself, I'll be able to maneuver Potter into place to distract him. After I've dealt with Tom, I'll let the Ministry deal with Potter. Popping another lemon drop into his mouth, Albus Dumbledore left his office to start inspecting the wards and shielding around the castle.

- The Burrow -

Ron was fuming. After seeing Daphne back to her home, Ron headed back to the Burrow. How many bloody lives does Potter have? I had that ambush planned out for weeks, and Boot goes ahead and misses, Ron thought. Fortunately, it can't be traced back to me. I guess the old saying is true, if you want something done right, you have to do it yourself. Putting any further plans of retribution against Potter and his mudblood girlfriend aside for the

moment, Ron took out Artus Weasley's journal and continued his study of its contents. Ron was grateful for the journal, as it helped resolve the internal conflict he had been having between his family loyalty and his newfound beliefs. With the knowledge that a Weasley had not only agreed with the philosophy of the current Deathaters, but had been one of the very people to help solidify the philosophical tenets that the Deathaters based their views on, Ron was confident in his choice.

The journal also opened Ron's eyes to the power behind the darker side of magic. Using the journal as a guide, Ron was not only learning about the philosophy his great uncle helped develop, but he was learning the necessary mental exercises to properly utilize these darker aspects without succumbing to their addiction. Ron wondered if the lack of this mental conditioning is what had caused several of the older Deathaters to crack. After reading for awhile, Ron put the journal away and began to practice his Occlumency. Ron had come across the mention of this art early on in his great uncle's journal, and following the instructions his great uncle outlined, he was determined to master the art. Given his new views on the Wizarding world, Ron felt that he would need the protection and advantages Occlumency provided.

- Hogwarts -

The morning following the Yule Ball found Harry and Hermione asleep in the Room of Requirement, having fallen asleep after retiring to the room to relax after their meeting with Dari Årmann. They had spent the better part of the night reading through the book that Dari Årmann had given to each of them.

- FLASHBACK -

Upon collapsing on the couch, provided by the Room of Requirement, Harry stated, "Some days, I swear Fate must have it in for the two of us."

"At least we found each other," Hermione pointed out as she hugged Harry.

Returning Hermione's hug, Harry agreed with her. "Mione," Harry asked, "do you think that Dumbledore knows about the prophecy? It might explain his actions toward us."

"I don't think so, Dari Àrmann mentioned that it was given to him by the goddess Brigid a century ago," Hermione replied. "What makes you think that it would explain the headmaster's actions?"

"If he controlled us, he could force how we completed the prophecy, or prevent us from completing it all together," Harry explained.

"That sounds logical," replied Hermione. "Given what the bastard has done to us already, I wouldn't put much past him. It would definitely help to know why Dumbledore did what he did, but I don't expect we'll be finding out anytime soon."

Nodding, Harry agreed with her. As they sat on the couch relaxing after the events of the evening, Harry and Hermione began reading through the journals Dari Àrmann had given them. As they read, they realized they had already succeeded in the first few exercises. Those exercises being: connecting to their magical cores, the Arts of Occlumency and Legilimency, and Wandless Magic. Seeing as their ancestors grew up without the crutch of using a wand, they viewed the mind arts differently than modern wizards. Harry and Hermione decided to start there. They figured if they could master this method, then they would possess an advantage over other wizards.

Dobby popped into the Room of Requirement a few hours later, as he felt that his master and mistress needed something. The somewhat erratic house elf smiled as he saw Harry and Hermione curled up on the couch together with open books in their hands. They were also fast asleep. Master Harry and Mistress Hermione have had busy day, Dobby thought as he took the books and after closing them, placed them on a table that appeared. After transfiguring the couch into a bed, Dobby covered them up with a quilt and, after leaving a note on top of the books, popped out of the room.

- END OF FLASHBACK -

The following morning, Harry and Hermione both woke with a start as they found themselves in bed together. After waking up a bit more, they realized they were both still in their clothes. After finding the note Dobby had left, they figured out they must have fallen asleep last night while studying. Sneaking back into Gryffindor Tower, they showered and changed clothes and headed down to eat.

During breakfast, Harry and Hermione decided with the exception of studying the journals, they would take a break from training and enjoy the last week of Christmas break.

The remainder of their break went by fast and soon it was January 3. As the staff got ready for the return of the students and the start of the new term, Harry and Hermione spent the time putting the finishing touches on their homework. Later that afternoon, the rest of the students arrived at Hogwarts after taking the Hogwarts Express from London. While Ron sneered at them as he went up to his room, the twins and Ginny stopped by and asked how their Christmas break was and to thank them for their gifts. As they chatted, Fred warned them, "Ron's been acting stranger than normal lately. He's been keeping to himself a lot and mumbling to himself about 'When he returns, the filth will be swept away.' We're not sure what he's up to but it can't be good."

"Thanks for the heads up Fred," replied Harry.

"Yeah," Hermione continued. "Harry and I think we might have an idea what's going on."

Groaning, Ginny asked, "What has Ron gotten himself into this time?"

"Given his new attitude about things," Harry pointed out. "Who does he remind you of?"

"Malfoy, why do you...," George started to say. "Oh Merlin, he wouldn't!"

"Given his attitude of late, his insistence that the world owes him, and his jealousy over others getting things he can't have, can you come up with a better explanation. That and his new attitude towards certain Slytherins," Hermione replied.

Still not getting the connection, Ginny asked, "Okay, spill it. What is Ron up to."

Looking at the others and then turning to look at Ginny, Harry replied, "It seems like Ron might have joined the Death Eaters."

George quickly cast a Silence charm on his sister.

By the look of Ginny's face, George was right to cast the charm, as it appeared that Ginny was currently going through every bit of profanity she knew. The fact that Ginny was still going after five minutes made her brothers wonder where their little sister had learned it all. After Ginny had calmed down, the five of them agreed to keep an eye on Ron, to see if he had truly joined the Death Eaters or if he had just become a Pureblood bigot. They were hoping it was the second one.

The following morning at breakfast, things just got worse as there was an article in the Daily Prophet about Hagrid being a half-giant. Harry and Hermione learned later that day in Care of Magical Creatures that Hagrid had been replaced by Professor Grubbly-Plank, his predecessor in teaching the class. The professor assured Harry and Hermione, when they asked about Hagrid, this was only temporary until the idiots on the school board calmed down.

"No offense intended professor," Harry explained, "but we miss Hagrid and hope he doesn't think we'll abandoned him because of this."

Smiling, Professor Grubbly-Plank replied, "I understand completely. Hagrid is one of the kindest people I know, and it irritates me that he was forced to step down because of his heritage."

Thanking the professor, Harry and Hermione left for the library so they could continue their research into the Ogham runic system. As Harry was reading through some known ancient Druidic rituals he noticed a common element in all of them: the blood of the caster. Putting the book aside, Harry took out his copy of their notes on the runic version of the Fidelius Charm and started to read through them again. A few minutes into reading the notes he stopped and smiled. That's it! It's so simple I can't believe we didn't see it earlier.

Turning to Hermione, Harry said, "Mione, I think I solved our problem with the project."

Chapter 8: The Second Task and Plans Develop

- Hogwarts Library -

Excitedly, Hermione asked Harry what he had found out. Harry explained according to the research he had done, the common element in all of the Druidic rituals was blood.

"My idea is, once we determine the correct runic seals to use, we carve them into pieces of stone we can turn into ward stones. After securing the stones around the boundaries of the place we want to hide, we then activate the runic seals with our own blood," stated Harry. "I've been reading up a little on blood wards used in certain Necromantic rituals, and I think we should be able to modify the process used to create basic blood wards to empower and activate the seals and the ward stones themselves."

Thinking through what Harry had outlined, Hermione had to agree the idea had merit and was definitely worth exploring further. Ever since they had gotten the books on Blood Magic, Hermione had found the subject intriguing and had started to look into the subject further, much like Harry and the subject of Necromancy.

"If we are successful in getting this to work," Harry continued. "We should be able to tie in runic pendants or bracelets to act as keys to the wards. Kind of like a physical representation of the 'secret' created by the Fidelius Charm."

Spurred on by this discovery, the two Gryffindors spent the remaining hours, before the library closed, deep in research. While Harry continued working on the development of the necessary runic seals, Hermione was going through her notes on Blood Wards and Blood Magic in general and began outlining a way to modify them to suit their own purposes.

- Headmaster's Office -

Albus Dumbledore was not having a good day. Due to Harry's "forced" participation in the Tri-Wizard Tournament, Albus had been trying to get Gringotts to list him as a secondary account holder on the Potter Vaults, so that if, or more likely when, Harry died during the tournament the Potter wealth and artifacts would not be lost to him. Unfortunately, according to Gringotts the only person who can

add people to the Potter account is Harry, and he would need to do so in person to verify his free will in the matter. This law, which applies to all Gringotts accounts, was put in place to help prevent accidental or deliberate mismanagement of the accounts.

Bloody goblins and their strict code of ethics, Albus thought as he paced up and down the floor. Besides the Potter wealth, James and Lily kept several rare tomes and such in their vault and I can't afford for any of it to be out of my control. Little did Albus know, he would have even more reason to curse the goblins shortly after the school year came to a close. As Albus continued his pacing, Fawkes continued to wonder if it was time he left Dumbledore and travel elsewhere.

Throughout the rest of the week and the next, Harry and Hermione, aside from attending their classes, continued to study from the book that Dari Àrmann had given them. Having continually practiced and refined their Occlumency skills, Harry and Hermione had little trouble adapting to the method outlined in the book. Using this method, Harry and Hermione found they not only were able to further strengthen their mental shields, but they were able to recall things quicker and with more clarity. As for the Druidic method of Legilimency, they found it was a less abrupt method than what they were learning, thus if mastered would be harder to detect. Harry and Hermione also learned it could be used to initiate mindspeaking between two practitioners who shared a magical bond between them. This method of communicating, they both realized, would come in handy down the road. Aside from this, Harry and Hermione also continued studying their independent subjects as well. Harry was delving into the art of Necromancy, while Hermione was learning about Blood Magic. While they wouldn't be able to go into practical applications of what they were learning until the summer, they felt they could at least learn the theoretical side.

That weekend, while most of the third years and older headed to Hogsmeade to relax and have fun, Harry and Hermione spent the day in the Chamber of Secrets practicing their spell casting both silently and without the aid of their wands. Due to their constant practice, Harry and Hermione noticed they were becoming more comfortable using magic without their wands than with them. Harry and Hermione also noticed the more comfortable they became with casting a spell without their wand, the less potent the spell became when they used their wand. Hermione theorized as they became

more accustomed to using magic without their wands, they became less effective of channeling their magic through their wands.

"It's like our wands act more like a hindrance to our magic than a focus for it," commented Harry.

"I agree," stated Hermione. "I suspect we will eventually lose the ability to even use a wand to perform magic."

"That could prove difficult to hide during our classes," Harry surmised. "Although, we can worry about that later."

Putting the problem on the back burner, Harry and Hermione continued to work on their advanced spell-work, along with making sure their regular homework was finished. Several hours later, as the day was drawing to a close, the two Gryffindors packed up their notes and books and headed back up to Gryffindor Tower. As they kept an eye on the Marauders' Map to keep from being spotted, they noticed Ron was in the Slytherin Common Room. It appeared that he was alone with Draco Malfoy, Theodore Knott, Pansy Parkinson, and Daphne Greengrass. The dot on the map representing Daphne was almost superimposed on the dot representing Ron, which meant they were practically sharing the same spot.

"Why do I get the feeling Ron has Daphne Greengrass on his lap," Hermione commented with a disgusted look on her face. "I thought Daphne had better taste in men than that."

"The problem with that statement," Harry pointed out, "is what is the real Ron like? For all we know, he very well may be her type."

Hermione had to agree with Harry's point on who the real Ronald Weasley was. As they continued onto the Gryffindor Common Room, they ran into Fred and George running like madmen in the direction of the Gryffindor Common Room. Turning to Hermione, Harry asked, "What do you do when you see Fred and George Weasley running away from something?"

Smiling, Hermione answered, "Try and keep up."

They sped up and soon entered into the Gryffindor Common Room shortly behind the twins. After letting Fred and George catch their breath, Hermione asked, "What did you two do this time?"

"Hermione, we're"

"hurt that you would think we"

"could have been up to something"

"mischievous,"

"dastardly,"

"or downright prankish."

Hermione just looked at them.

"I fear she knows us too well, George," chuckled Fred

"That she does, Fred," agreed George. Turning back to Hermione, George replied, "We were setting up a prank by the Slytherin Common Room and we overcharge the activation charm. The door will have to be repaired, otherwise the prank itself went off without a hitch. Anyone in the room will be sporting multicolored feathers for the next twenty-four hours."

Hermione and Harry looked at each other and fell onto the couch laughing at the situation.

"It's perfect," Harry explained to the twins, after calming down. "Ron gets nailed with a prank he knows came from you guys, but he can't report it because he would have to explain why he was in the Slytherin Common Room. Something I don't think he wants getting back to your mother."

Hermione further explained what they had seen on the Marauders' Map. This of course made both the twins a little queasy and left to plan something for their little brother. In the meantime, Harry and Hermione got out a couple of books and decided to relax until dinner.

Later at dinner, Ron was nowhere to be seen, but nobody could miss several of the Slytherin students due to the brightly colored feathers covering them. At Neville's questioning look, Harry let Ginny and him in on what had happened. Ginny was shocked when she heard about Ron, and stated things were getting out of hand if

Ron was more openly associating with the Slytherins. Neville suggested for the moment, they continue to keep an eye on Ron, as they didn't have any proof that he was up to something. The four of them chatted for a while about this and that until Ginny and Neville headed to the greenhouse to work on Herbology, while Harry and Hermione went up to the Room of Requirement to practice some more lethal hexes and curses they had been learning.

The next five weeks went by fairly uneventful by Hogwarts standards. There were the odd pranks here and there, courtesy of students from all three schools. Ron was slowly becoming more and more open about his feelings about Purebloods. He hadn't done anything to warrant the attention of any of the faculty, but it was readily apparent to his fellow Gryffindors, what his viewpoint was. Neville and Ginny were both doing independent studies with Professor Sprout for Herbology, and they had announced to their friends they were formally betrothed. Both Harry and Hermione congratulated the two of them, stating they were perfect for each other. As for Harry and Hermione, they continued training in both their magic and their physical fitness. By the time February 23 came around, they had mastered casting silently all the way through their seventh year and were most of the way through that year without the use of their wands.

On the downside, they discovered it was no longer practical for either of them to use their wands for most lower powered incantations. In truth, anything Harry and Hermione had learned during their first three years they could no longer cast with their wands with any degree of success. Also, due to their continual practicing of their respective elemental abilities, Harry and Hermione had reached the point where they could make use of their abilities with little effort. It was only when they were either Shadow Walking or Fire Flashing long distances, such as to either the Grangers or the Dursleys, that it took a noticeable amount of effort and energy.

That evening at dinner, it was announced the Second Task, which would be held tomorrow, would consist of a dueling tournament between the four champions. The format was as follows: two duels in the morning, two in the afternoon, and the final two in the evening. A win would earn the champion 10 points, while a lose would earn them 5 points. These total would be added to the points earned during the First Task. Anything except Dark Magic or the Unforgivables were allowed.

"The first duel tomorrow will be at 9am. It will be between Harry Potter and Fleur Delacour, followed by Cedric Diggory and Victor Krum," announced Ludo Bagman.

"Given that the champions will need time to prepare for their duels," Albus Dumbledore stated to the students, "I and my two colleagues have agreed they will be excused from all classes tomorrow without penalty."

"That's good to know," Harry commented.

"Hey Potter," Ron sneered. "You'd better reserve a cot with Madam Pomfrey, as you're going to need it."

"Ignore the idiot," Ginny replied as she glared at her brother. "I'm sure you'll be fine."

"Yeah," Neville agreed. "Knowing you and Hermione, I'm sure you've been studying up for the tournament."

Chuckling, Harry replied, "I'm sure I'll have a few tricks up my sleeves."

Seeing that he wasn't going to get a rise out of Harry, Ron grumbled something about half-blood arrogance and left the table. A few minutes later, the rest of them finished eating and went their separate ways. Harry and Hermione headed to the library to continue researching on their Ancient Runes project.

The next morning, Harry and Hermione got up just before dawn, as was their habit as of late, and did their morning exercises in the Room of Requirement prior to going down for breakfast. Afterward, they spent the next couple of hours relaxing prior to Harry's duel with Fleur.

It was soon time for the first duel to take place. As Harry and Hermione entered the Great Hall, they noticed the tables had been cleared away and a dueling stage had been erected in the center of the hall. As Harry moved to head over to where the duelers were to wait until they were called, Hermione gave him a quick kiss and wished him luck.

"Hey Harry," Cedric called out as Harry approached the stage.

"Hey Cedric," Harry said as he walk up to the sixth year Hufflepuff.
"You ready for this task?"

Nodding, Cedric asked if Harry was.

"I think so," Harry replied, "but we'll find out soon enough."

A few minutes late, Ludo Bagman called for Harry and Fleur to each go to opposite sides of the stage. On Bagman's instructions, they held their wands up in front of them and bowed to each other. Ludo Bagman raised his hand and, at the count of three, dropped it with a wave. With that the duel began.

Fleur immediately called out a string of incantations in French, while Harry dodged out of the way while he called out, "Flipendo, Confundus, Tarantallegra, Stupefy."

They continued to circle each other as they cast numerous hexes, jinxes, and curses at each other. Harry had to keep reigning himself in, so as not to reveal his true abilities. He so far had managed to keep his spells limited to the standard set of spells taught to Hogwarts students, and a few not so standard ones found in the Restricted Section. Deciding to end it, Harry let loose a Stupefy hex followed by the Petrificus Totalus curse. What the spectators didn't see was that Harry had used the Stupefy curse as an overlay on top of one of his Shadow Bolts. While Fleur's Protego shield charm blocked the weak Stupefy, it did not block the Shadow Bolt which went right through the shield and hit Fleur squarely in the stomach. With her concentration broken by the Shadow Bolt, Fleur's shield charm wavered and she was hit by the Body Bind curse. As Fleur fell to the ground, Harry summoned her wand to him, thus ending the duel.

Walking over to Fleur, Harry canceled the Body Bind, and helped her to her feet. As Harry returned Fleur's wand to her, he replied with a slight bow, "C'était un bon duel, mademoiselle."

"Oui monsieur, c'était un bon duel," Fleur replied in French.

As they left the stage to make room for Cedric and Victor, Fleur asked where he had learned to speak French so well, as his

pronunciation was almost perfect. Harry explained that his girlfriend, Hermione Granger, had vacationed in France for the past several summers with her parents. She felt as she was a guest of the country, it was only proper she speak the language. She had begun teaching him what she had learned when they learned that Beauxbatons was to be visiting. It was during these lessons, Harry had learned he had a knack for learning languages, and found he enjoyed learning new ones. Hermione, herself, also seemed to have a knack for languages. One of their more mundane hobbies was learning new languages, current ones and ancient. They suspected it might be a magical talent, but couldn't be sure until they found a way of determining what talents they did possess. Harry had sent a letter, via Dobby, to Griphook asking if the goblins knew of such a method. He expected a letter any day now in regards to the inquiry.

"It's good to know not all you English are stuck up snobs," Fleur commented quietly.

Smiling, Harry replied, "I'll leave being an idiotic snob to people like the Malfoys."

Nodding in agreement, Fleur took her leave to join her fellow classmates, while Harry went over to where Hermione was waiting with Neville, Ginny, and the twins. After pulling Harry into a hug, Hermione asked, "What were you and Fleur talking about?"

"Languages and English snobs," Harry replied.

As Cedric and Victor were about to start, they stopped to watch the duel. As the two wizards dueled, Harry paid close attention to their dueling styles and looked for any patterns and weak points they may have. Cedric appeared to rely on his dodging abilities and subtle attacks, while Victor tended to use strong arm tactics while dueling. In the end, Victor was declared the winner when an overcharged bludgeoning curse broke through Cedric's shield and rendered him unconscious. As Cedric was tended to by Madame Pomfrey, Ludo Bagman announced the afternoon duels would take place promptly at 2pm. As the spectators started to leave and go off to attend to other things until the afternoon duels, Harry and Hermione snuck off to the Chamber of Secrets to be by themselves for a few hours and to check on a few potions that they had started brewing a few days ago which needed tending. Among these was a batch of concentrated Befuddlement Draught. Harry had the idea of

converting the concentrated version of the potion into a gaseous form which could be placed in a breakable container holding a Stasis Charm. As the potion was nearly ready, Harry began preparing several small glass balls to contain the gaseous potion.

"I see you've figured out the state conversion issue with Befuddlement Draught," Hermione commented as she was examining the consistency of the two batches of Felix Felicis they had been brewing. Once completed they would be stored in Stasis charmed containers in their storeroom inside the Chamber, along with the other potions they had brewed and had stored there.

"Yeah," replied Harry as he finished with the last globe. "I found the key in that Muggle Chemistry book we picked up a couple of months ago. I figured the duel with Krum would be a good testing ground for them. The rules did state anything was legal except Dark Magic and the Unforgivables."

"That should be interesting to watch," Hermione chuckled. She then sat back and watched as Harry took doses of the Befuddlement Draught out of the cauldron and, after placing them into the treated glass globes began to intone a long string of words moving his hands in an intricate pattern in front of him.

Parseltongue, Hermione laughed to herself, Leave it to Harry to develop a new way of harnessing a potion's usability and hide the process in a language unknown to practically the entire planet. Not a bad idea though, it'll cut down on people stealing our secrets. Hermione made a mental note to translate all of their notes into ancient languages.

After Harry finished filling the glass globes with the now gaseous Befuddlement Draught, he shrunk them with the Reducio Charm and placed them inside his robes. As they headed out of the Chamber of Secrets, Hermione asked if Harry thought anyone noticed that his spells didn't originate from his wand, but the hand holding the wand.

"I don't think so," Harry replied, "but we'll have to keep our eyes and hears open just in case."

"Given our history here at Hogwarts, that's a given," Hermione agreed.

Nodding to his girlfriend, Harry thought, Given our history here, some days I'm surprised we made it this far.

After cleaning up from the potion brewing, Harry and Hermione headed down to the kitchens for lunch, as they didn't want to deal with Ron right before the next duel, plus they knew the food would be safe from tampering in the kitchens. During lunch, Harry and Hermione chatted with the house elves as they went about their tasks in the kitchen. While they understood that house elves needed to be bonded to a wizard or Wizarding family to survive, they still wanted to know about their culture and such. Harry and Hermione believed, contrary to most magical humans, they could learn from the other magical races of the world, and the more knowledge they had the better prepared they would be. Seeing these two humans truly wished to know and understand, an elderly looking house elf, who's task was to oversee the other house elves in the kitchen, by the name of Qin agreed to tell them about the origins of the house elf race.

As they ate, the two Gryffindors learned the house elf race itself originated from a race of magical imps, closely related to creatures known as gremlins, who delighted in causing mischief and chaos of one kind or another. Eventually the early tribes of humans became fed up with all the interference, so they called upon their priests to come up with a solution. As mass genocide was not an option, the priests called upon their gods for aid in their plight. Eventually a bargain was struck. The progenitor race of the present day house elves agreed to bind their lives and magic to those human families who had magic flowing through them as well. In exchange for this eternal servitude, the humans would be responsible for the caring of their new servants and seeing to it they had something to do as it was against the imps' nature to be lazy and not working on something. Over the centuries, the race of imps and their magic evolved into what it was today. Although most magical humans have long since forgotten the ancient pact, and some even mistreat the house elf race, the house elves still honor the ancient pact made by their ancestors.

"If humans broke the pact by not treating the house elves with care," Hermione asked, "why is it the house elves' lives and magic are still bound by the pact?"

"While it is true," Qin nodded, "that the ancient pact has been broken. Most house elves are happy with their current situation and have no desire to change it. For the ancient magic binding our race to yours to be lifted, all house elves would have to acknowledge this fact and wish to regain their independence."

Qin went on to state, in his opinion, this would not occur any time soon. Most house elves didn't feel their current families had broken the ancient pact, and for those families that have, their house elves are once again allowed to cause certain levels of mischief against those specific families. Such mischief commonly takes the form of taking orders literally and not offering up helpful suggestions or warnings, but more subtle pranks were not unheard of. Qin finished by stating those humans that have broken faith with the house elf race, will forever be fair game for any house elf who is tied to their family. Out of all the humans who have broken the pact, none have ever atoned for their actions.

Thanking Qin for his time, and the other house elves for the food, Harry and Hermione headed back to the Gryffindor Common room to relax for a bit prior to the second round of duels. Ron, besides glaring and making comments, left them alone. While most of Gryffindor House still believed Harry had something to do with his name being drawn, they had been informed by Professor McGonagall that any provoking of Harry in regards to the situation with the tournament, would be dealt with severely. So far, only Ron had called their head of house on her promise, and was still doing detention with Flich for his actions.

At around 1:30, Harry headed down to the Great Hall to join the other champions by the dueling stage, while Hermione went with Ginny and Neville to join the other spectators. After everyone had gathered to watch the second round of duels, Ludo Bagman called up Fleur and Cedric to take their places on the dueling stage. Having already dueled Fleur, Harry made sure to pay attention to Cedric as they would be dueling later that evening. As with his duel with Victor, Cedric relied heavily on his dodging abilities and lightning attacks to send multiple spells at Fleur, while he weaved about avoiding her attacks. Fleur, as Harry remembered had a similar dueling style as she continued to move around as well. Eventually, Cedric managed to get a leg-locking jinx to connect and was able to disarm her as she fell.

After declaring Cedric the winner of the duel, Ludo Bagman called for Harry and Victor to the stage. Remembering Victor's brutal style of dueling from watching the previous duel with Cedric, Harry immediately put up his strongest shield as Bagman's count ended. Ducking at the sight of several spells heading his way, Harry leveled an explosion hex at the ground in front of Victor's feet. The resulting explosion kicked up large parts of the stage. As chunks of the stage flew at Victor, who had not bothered to put up a shield, had to stop casting to avoid being hit by them. As soon as Harry had released the explosion hex, he silently turned one of his globes filled with the Befuddlement Draught invisible. Then, as he faked casting the Petrificus Totalus curse with his wand, Harry banished the globe toward Victor.

Just as he avoided the last of the debris, Victor saw a bolt of white light heading toward him. Fortunately, Victor was able to throw up a Protego Charm in time to block the curse from hitting him. Unfortunately, the presence of the shield charm caused the globe to shatter on impact. Due to the passive nature of the gas, the Protego shield did nothing to stop it from affecting Victor. Upon seeing Victor suddenly waver in what he was doing, Harry surmised the gaseous form of the Befuddlement Draught had started to effect him. Deciding to take a chance, Harry quickly sent two Stupefy hexes at the Durmstrang champion. This quickly ended the duel, with Harry walking up to Victor and taking his wand from his hand. Upon receiving the Durmstrang champion's wand, Ludo Bagman declared Harry the winner. Many negative things could be said about Victor Krum, but dishonorable was not one of them. He may be some what arrogant, but Victor, if nothing else, was an honorable man. Upon being revived and having his wand returned to him, Victor gladly went over to shake Harry's hand and congratulate him on his win.

"Thank you," Harry replied in Bulgarian, as he shook Victor's hand. "It was an honor to duel you."

"There is more to you than meets the eye, Mr. Potter." Victor replied in his native tongue.

Harry just smiled and took his leave as he had seen Hermione coming up to him. After giving Hermione a hug, they headed back to where Ginny and Neville were to listen to Ludo Bagman announce the current scores and to let everyone know that the final round of duels would be held at seven o'clock this evening after which dinner

would be served. Needing to finish up some Charms and Potions homework, Harry and Hermione headed to the library to hopefully get it done before the final duels took place.

- Slytherin Common Room -

Ronald Weasley was irritated to say the least. Not only had Potter not been harmed at all during the last two rounds of dueling, the half-blood git had somehow managed to win his first two duels.

"What's up Ron," asked Daphne Greengrass as she walked into the Slytherin Common Room. "You seem irritated about something."

"That bloody git has more lives than a cat," Ron growled.

"Try to relax, Ron," Daphne replied as she started to massage the back of his shoulders. "Potter will get what's coming to him soon enough. You just need to have a little faith in the fact our cause will win in the end."

Starting to loosen up under Daphne's ministrations, Ron once again thanked his lucky stars for coming to his senses and befriending the Slytherin girl. Unbeknown to the two fourth year students, their actions were being watched by a hidden figure. I never thought I'd live to see the day a Weasley actually grew a brain and amounted to something. After watching Ronald these past few weeks, it appears I was mistaken about his point of view. Lucius was right when he said the young Gryffindor would gladly join the Dark Lord when he returns." Turning away from the Slytherin Common Room, the Potions Master headed back down the secret passage and entered his office. There he began to write a letter to Lucius Malfoy informing him of the state of things and to assure him things were going according to plan. He also had changed his mind in regards to a request the young Weasley lad had asked about earlier that day, and sent a house elf to advise him of Snape's approval.

- Headmaster's Office -

Albus Dumbledore was pleased with the way things were going with the tournament. While neither he nor Alastor Moody had discovered how Potter's name had been entered, Albus was pleased to see Harry's progress in the tournament so far. With Harry being entered into the tournament and the incident at the International Quidditch

Cup, not to mention the rise in dark magic activity, I feel Voldemort's followers may be trying to return their master back to corporeal form. I'll have to have the portraits and the castle ghosts be on the lookout for anything suspicious. I can't afford to have anything happen to Potter before I've assured the Potter estate will fall to me. I can't have their wealth and magical tomes fall to anyone else.

Sucking on a lemon drop, Albus sat down at his desk to continue with what seemed to be an endless amount of paperwork which needed his attention. Not only did he have the paperwork involved in running Hogwarts, Albus had several documents that needed his approval as Head of the Wizengamot.

- Room of Requirement -

After finishing their homework, Harry and Hermione headed off to the Room of Requirement to get in a few hours of studying before the final round of duels were to take place. At this point, aside from honing their elemental powers, the two Gryffindors were studying advanced magics not found in either the Hogwarts curriculum or the Hogwarts library. They had managed to master both the arts of Occlumency and Legilimency using the techniques described in the book Dari Årmann had left them, and had advanced their knowledge and skill of Silent and Wandless Magic to the point that they no longer needed words or wands to cast the spells from any of the Hogwarts textbooks. For the more advance magics and rituals that they were learning from their private collection, however, they still needed their wands. At the moment Hermione was deep into reading a text on Blood Magic, while Harry was delving into a text on Necromancy.

"Mione, if I'm not mistaken," Harry pointed out as he set his book down. "We're going to need to create staffs for ourselves, if we are going to get much further in these arts. It's essentially required for any practical application of Necromancy, and from what you've told me about Blood Magic, you'd face the same problem."

"You're right Harry," Hermione stated setting down her book. "The problem is getting the materials together to make proper staffs. From my research and meditation, I'll need salamander scales, dragon's blood, and liquid fire for the core and ironwood for the staff itself."

Nodding, Harry replied, "I know what you mean about exotic materials. I've learned that I'll need Dementor's blood, Thestral scales, and lethifold skin for the core and black elderwood for the staff. Although getting a hold of the materials shouldn't be too difficult. While it's true we can't get a hold of the materials without drawing unwanted attention, Dobby informed me that due to his time with the Malfoys, he should be able to track down the materials for us."

"But wouldn't that put him in danger?" Hermione asked with a worried look on her face.

"If you want to try and explain that to Dobby," Harry said with a chuckle, "go ahead, but he nearly bit my head off for implying he couldn't handle the task."

"No offense to Dobby," Hermione stated, "but he is one seriously disturbed house elf."

"True Mione, but he's also one of the best house elves I've met," Harry pointed out as he called for Dobby.

"What can Dobby be doing for Master Harry and Mistress Hermione," Dobby exclaimed as he popped into the room.

Given Dobby the list of materials they would need to build their staffs, plus a letter to Gringotts to release two gemstones from the Potter Vault to Dobby. A deep red, polished orb made up of a single fist-sized ruby and a polished orb of obsidian just as large as the ruby. According to the records, they had been in the Potter Family for over two centuries. Supposedly, they had been purchased in Russia from a dealer in antiquities. When Harry had seen them in the vault, he had felt the power emanating from them and knew that they would be useful down the road. Harry couldn't think of a better use for them, than as the capstones for his and Hermione's staffs.

After about another hour of studying their respective books, Harry and Hermione headed down to the Great Hall for the final round of dueling. As they headed down the hallway, they heard a loud voice call out "Sectumsempra!" Instantly reacting, Harry and Hermione dropped to the ground and spun around as they both threw Bludgeoning Hexes toward where they had heard the sound come from. They were rewarded by hearing a thump coming from the floor

just ahead of them. Searching around, they found the unconscious body of their attacker under an invisibility cloak.

"It's Theodore Nott!" exclaimed Hermione as she removed the invisibility cloak.

"He must of thought he could catch us unawares," Harry said. He then got a evil grin on his face. After taking Nott's wand, Harry covered him back up with the invisibility cloak. Motioning Hermione to follow him, Harry headed to the girl's bathroom on that floor and, after snapping the wand, asked Hermione to place the two pieces under one of the stalls. Laughing at the implications which would come about, Hermione was more than happy to oblige. Still chuckling, Harry and Hermione entered the Great Hall a few minutes later. As before, Harry headed toward the stage where the champions were to wait until they were called upon to duel, while Hermione headed off to look for Neville and Ginny.

As Harry and Cedric were talking about the tournament, Ludo Bagman entered the Great Hall and announced the final round of the 2nd Task would now commence. "First up to duel are the Hogwarts champions, Cedric Diggory and Harry Potter," Bagman announced.

Nodding to each other, Harry and Cedric made their way to opposite ends of the dueling stage and waited for Ludo Bagman's signal to start. At the signal, Harry and Cedric bowed to each other and with their wands held in front of them, waited for the countdown. "Don't hold back Harry," Cedric called out, "as I won't."

Nodding, Harry replied, "May the best dueler win."

As soon as Ludo Bagman's countdown ended both Harry and Cedric went into action. Both Hogwarts champions had similar styles, as they relied on their dodging abilities to keep from being hit instead of depleting their magical energy by generating a shield. Cedric's got good reflexes. Not surprising, given that he's the Hufflepuff Seeker, Harry thought as he readied another of his globes filled with gaseous Befuddlement Draught. Harry then silently, and without his wand, banished the globe toward the ground at Cedric's feet. He then sent off an Aguamenti Charm followed by a Glacialis Charm. Cedric, however, quickly removed the ice from the stage before sending an Incarcerous hex toward Harry. Ducking out of the

way of the hex, Harry thought, That sneaky Hufflepuff must have a Bubble-Head Charm on himself. Oh well, looks like I'll have to do this the hard way.

This exchange of spells went on for several minutes, with each dueler only receiving minor cuts and bruises. Finally, Harry managed to hit Cedric with a Confundus Charm, which slowed down his reaction time, followed by several Stupefying Charms, two of which hit him squarely on the chest. Upon declaring Harry the winner, Ludo Bagman went over to Cedric and revived him.

Shaking Harry's hand, Cedric said, "Good match, Harry. I was wondering which one of us was going tire out first."

"I can thank my cousin Dudley for my endurance," Harry said chuckling. "By the way," Harry continued quietly. "Nice use of the Bubble-Head Charm."

Smiling, Cedric replied in a whisper, "I know you did something to Victor to make him act confused, and given the fact you were essentially raised like a Muggleborn, my mother suggested the Charm would help against any mundane means you could have used such as a type of gas or something. Don't worry about me telling anyone, as far as I'm concerned we half-bloods have to look out for each other. Besides, it only goes to prove that Muggles aren't as inferior to magical folk as some Purebloods would like to think."

"Very true," Harry replied as they went their separate ways.

As he walked back toward his friends, Cedric thought, I feel sorry for anyone who underestimates Harry. I think that Gryffindor has a mind which could rival a Ravenclaw.

Meanwhile, Harry had located Hermione and the two of them were talking about the last duel as they waited for the last one to start up.

"That was a close match, Harry," Hermione commented. "It was amazing to watch the two of you move around out there. I don't think either one of you used a shielding charm more than once during the whole match."

"I don't think so either, Mione," Harry replied. "All those times Dudley and his gang chased me growing up, actually proved beneficial."

Giving Harry a hug, Hermione asked why he didn't use one of the Befuddlement Globes like he had done with Victor.

Chuckling, Harry replied that he had, and then filled Hermione in on the conversation Cedric and he had after the match. Hermione smirked at the dig Cedric made at those Purebloods who looked down on Muggles and Muggleborns. A few minutes later, Ludo Bagman announced that the final duel was about to begin and for Fleur and Victor to take their places on the dueling stage.

Compared to Cedric and Harry's duel, the duel between the Beauxbatons Champion and the Durmstrang Champion went by fairly quickly. From what Harry and Hermione could see, Victor didn't take Fleur as seriously as he should have. Fleur, on the other hand, took Victor very seriously and intended to finish the duel as quickly as possible. She quickly threw several Stupefy Charms, along with an Incarcerous Charm and a Full Body-Bind Curse. While the stunners were absorbed by Victor's shield, they wore the shield down enough that the Incarcerous Charm made it through, followed by the Full Body-Bind Curse. When Victor was released from the body bind, he bowed to Fleur before leaving the stage.

After the stage was removed from the Great Hall, Ludo Bagman came out and announced the scores. "Currently tied for first and second place with 70 points are Harry Potter and Victor Krum. Tied for third and fourth place with 50 points are Cedric Diggory and Fleur Delacour. As the champions still have one final task to complete, it is still anyone's game. The third and final task will take place on June 24, however, the champions will not receive any details on the task until May 27."

With this last announcement, Ludo Bagman turned things over to Headmaster Dumbledore, who returned the House tables and bid everyone to eat. As they were eating, Harry leaned over to Neville and quietly asked, "Is Ron still glaring at us?"

"Yeah mate," Neville replied. "You'd think he'd just get his head out of his arse and stop being such a git about everything."

"It'd be nice," Hermione said as she joined the conversation. "Ginny was telling me earlier, that Ron's still convinced because he's a Pureblood, he shouldn't have to work as hard as the rest of us."

"I think it's safe to say, Ron has truly become the Gryffindor version of Draco Malfoy," Harry commented.

As the others nodded in agreement, they turned the conversation to more pleasant things. Meanwhile, down at the end of the Gryffindor Table, Ron was tired of Potter being so blasted lucky. Someone has to put the prat in his place. I'll have to ask Sirius when he gets here in a couple of weeks. He ran with Potter's father during their school years, and might have a few ideas. I hope he'll let Draco and I in on what he's got planned. All Draco was able to get out of him, was that it involved a major turning point in the cause's future. Finishing his meal, Ron got up and headed back up to his dorm to study more from his Great-Uncle Artus Weasley's journal. Professor Snape had agreed to allow Ron to work on an independent project for Potions, in order to boost his grade in the class. Ever since Ron had started reading through the potions section of the journal, his aptitude for the art had slowly improved. This fact had not gone unnoticed by the Potions Master and, given that the young Weasley had shown he had come to his senses as to how the magical world worked, Professor Snape decided to give the boy a chance to prove he wasn't a complete dunderhead when it came to potions.

- London, England -

Sirius Orion Black was having a good year. Not only was he still a free man, but he had managed to locate the spirit of his lord while searching in the forests of Albania. Following Lord Voldemort's instructions, Sirius had kidnapped a one year old child, and through a dark ritual had bound the spirit of his lord into the child, thus destroying the child's soul and replacing it with Lord Voldemort's. Sirius then brought his lord, along with Voldemort's familiar, Nagini, back to Britain.

They were now staying at Riddle Manor in Little Hangleton, under the Fidelius Charm. Along with caring for his lord, Sirius was searching for a way to give Voldemort a fully functional adult body. Sirius thought he may have found a solution, but he wanted to verify the information he had discovered before bringing it to Voldemort. Leaving Voldemort under the care of Kreacher, the Black Family house elf, Sirius journeyed to London to check the vast library in the family manor.

Sneaking through the city of London in his Animagus form, Sirius made his way to Number 12, Grimmauld Place. After ducking into a nearby alleyway, Sirius resumed his human form and cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself. Thus concealed, he walked up to the property and entered through the main gate. Once he was inside the manor wards, Sirius dropped the Disillusionment Charm and entered the home of his youth.

As he walked through the main entrance way, Sirius stopped in front of the portrait of his mother, Walburga Black. "Greetings, mother. How are you on this fine day?"

"Sirius Orion Black," the portrait replied. "I had heard that you had escaped from Azkaban, and were on the run from those fools at the Ministry of Magic. You had better have a good reason for not coming here until now."

"I have a very good reason indeed," Sirius stated. "After escaping from Azkaban, I headed back to Hogwarts to finish the job I had started when I betrayed the Potters to our lord. I know this wasn't the brightest of ideas, but I was still recovering from Azkaban, so my reasoning skills were still shot. After failing to kill Harry Potter, I went underground for about a month, before I heard rumors of a dark spirit haunting the forests of Albania. Knowing our lord had taken some precautions to ensure his continued life, I traveled there to see if it was indeed our lord." Pausing a moment to conjure a drink, Sirius continued, "I was right in my assumption, and discovered Lord Voldemort's spirit inhabiting his familiar, the great serpent, Nagini. After performing a dark ritual that replaced the soul of a child with our lord's spirit, I returned to Britain with him and am currently searching for a way to return Lord Voldemort to his adult body."

Nodding her head with a smile, Walburga Black replied, "This is a very acceptable reason for not coming sooner. If I remember correctly, there may be some information in the Black Family Library which would be of some use to you."

"I thought as much," Sirius agreed. "I think I've come across a solution, but I want to double check my information before presenting it to our lord." With that Sirius bid his mother good day and made his way up to the library where he began to go through the ancient texts to find the information he was looking for.

- Hogwarts Library -

After cleaning up from the duels and dinner, Harry and Hermione headed to the library to continue working on their Ancient Runes project and to be seen, so as to not arouse anyone's suspicions. They had managed to make some decent headway in their Fidelius Runic Wards, and were looking into doing a practical test of their runic design.

"What we need to find is a location which everyone knows about, so we would be able to tell if it worked or not," Harry stated.

"I agree Harry," Hermione said as she chewed the ends of a lock of her hair in contemplation. "It should probably be a decent sized area as well."

Harry suddenly got a wicked looking grin on his face. "I've got the perfect place to try it out."

"I know that look, Harry," Hermione said with a knowing look on her face. "Where did you have in mind."

"The Quidditch field," Harry said with a lopsided grin.

Hermione's jaw dropped, and she just stared at her boyfriend. She moved her mouth, but no words came out. Soon, however, a companion grin to Harry's soon formed on her face. Looking at Harry, Hermione said, "Perfect. When should we start?"

"If we work on the boundary stones tomorrow, we should be able to test it out tomorrow evening," Harry estimated.

With that, the two Gryffindors packed up their notes and books, and left the library to head up to bed, as tomorrow was going to be a busy day. Deciding not to chance meeting up with Ron, as he had barely been civil with them all week, they crashed in the Room of Requirement on a bed the room provided for them. Soon they were dressed in night clothes, and cuddled up against each other fast asleep.

Chapter 9: Ancient Runes and Animagus

The following morning, Harry and Hermione, after washing up, managed to sneak back into Gryffindor Tower without being seen. From there they headed down to the Great Hall for breakfast, before heading to Transfiguration. As the class started, Professor McGonagall explained they would be continuing their study on cross-species transfiguration.

"As some of you may know," Professor McGonagall explained, "mastering this skill is the first step in understanding the processes needed to become an Animagus. This subject will of course be covered in your sixth year. For now let's concentrate on changing your mice into squirrels."

Having already advanced to human transfiguration, Harry and Hermione were the first to successfully complete the assignment. While this fact was not exactly uncommon in class, what they proceeded to do next, while not noticed by their classmates, was definitely noticed by Professor McGonagall.

As Minerva McGonagall sat back and observed her students, she began making notes on which students seemed to be struggling and which seemed to be grasping the incantation. On the struggling list, not to her surprise, was Ronald Weasley. His work has drastically decreased in quality since he distanced himself from Harry and Hermione. Apparently without their prodding to actually study the material, Ronald seems to have slipped back into his previously lazy tendencies. Neville, however, seems to have finally overcome his self-esteem issue, and is progressing well. I'm not one for betrothal arrangements this early, but young Ginevra Weasley has definitely managed to bring Neville out of his shell. I've noticed he tends to spend more time with Harry and Hermione as well. With the encouragement Neville gets from his friends, I'm certain he will continue to improve. As she looked around the room, Minerva happened to look over at Harry and Hermione, and notice something odd about what they were doing.

Taking a closer look, she noticed that while Harry and Hermione were still changing their mice into squirrels, they were changing the mice into different types of squirrels. Chuckling to herself, Minerva thought, It appears the Potters have been studying ahead in this class. It also appears they aren't putting a whole lot of effort behind

their wand waving either. It was then she noticed something which shocked her profoundly.

Deciding to verify what she thought she was seeing, Minerva relaxed and reached out with her Mage Sight. As she looked closer at the two Gryffindors' wand movements, she saw that, where the magic was flowing out of the other students' wands toward their mice, Harry and Hermione's wands didn't appear to be directing the flow of their magic at all. Instead the flow of magic was being directed by the hand not holding the wand.

Why those sneaky little cubs, Minerva thought. Not only are they performing the incantation without their wands, they doing a decent job at covering that detail up. Studying ahead my foot, those two have managed to surpass most wizards. I wonder how far ahead they actually are in Transfiguration. If they've managed to master Wandless Transfiguration at this level, then performing the class assignments is a waste of their time.

At the end of class, Minerva held both Harry and Hermione back, so that she could talk with them, and see at what level they actually reached.

"What can we do for you professor?" Harry asked.

Giving them both a stern look, Minerva said, "I noticed how easy it seemed for you both to complete the class assignment today, so you can start by telling me how far ahead in Transfiguration you are."

Glancing guiltily at each other, and realizing lying to their head of house would be inadvisable at best, Hermione answered, "Seventh year."

"With, or without your wands?" Minerva asked with a smile on her face.

At this both Harry and Hermione paled. Bloody hell, we're in trouble.

Gulping, Harry answered, "Both, ma'am."

"For some reason, I'm not surprised," Minerva replied with a chuckle. "I'm not going to pry any further, but as it is obvious you already

know the lessons, having you repeat them in class is a waste of your time and mine. So I propose for the remainder of the term, the two of you do an independent study project on an aspect of Transfiguration. Your final exam grade will be determined by how well you succeed in this project. I feel this will provide you with enough of a challenge to prevent you from slacking off. Weekly reports on your progress will take the place of any homework assignments I hand out in class. I will give you until next class to come up with an idea for a project. Do you have any questions?"

"Only one ma'am," stated Hermione. "How did you know?"

"The members of the McGonagall line have been gifted with the ability of Mage Sight. This allows us to see auras and the flow of magic. As a side note, the headmaster also has this ability, so be careful."

Thanking Professor McGonagall for the opportunity and the warning, Harry and Hermione, hand in hand, headed off to lunch before they had to go to their Defense Against the Dark Arts class. During DADA, Professor Moody informed the class that as they had now had the opportunity to see how a formal wizard's duel was run, they would now get to experience it. He then proceeded to pair off each of the students, making sure it ended up Gryffindor versus Slytherin. Unfortunately, Gryffindor had one more student than Slytherin that day as Theodore Nott was still in the hospital wing after someone had found him unconscious under an invisibility cloak in the seventh floor corridor.

"Okay Potter," Professor Moody exclaimed, "since you already have some practical experience in dueling, you can sit out this round. However, I want a two foot essay on what you should be looking for during a duel, and what you should know before even getting involved in one."

"Yes, sir," Harry said as he got out his textbook and started to write. However, he kept an eye out on his surroundings, as he would not put it past the professor to try and get the drop on him. Sure enough, about half way through the class Harry saw Professor Moody pointing his wand at him. Pretending to not be paying attention, Harry silently threw up a Mirror Shield between the professor and himself. A second after Harry raised the shield a red bolt shot out of Moody's wand toward Harry. To Moody's surprise, he saw his spell

rebound back toward him. After he managed to put up a Protego Shield Charm, Moody gave out a deep laugh and called for the students' attention.

"First off, 20 points to Gryffindor for Potter not only paying attention to his surroundings, but managing to trick me into thinking he was not paying attention and was open for attack. Second, where is your wand Potter?"

In answer to Professor Moody's question, Harry gave his wrist a flick and his wand appeared in his hand from inside his sleeve. What Harry kept to himself, was he never used his wand to put up the Mirror Shield.

Smiling at Potter's answer, Moody stated, "Excellent answer Mr. Potter. Make a note of this, people. The quicker you can have your wand ready, the quicker you can defend and counter-attack."

After class, Harry and Hermione snuck off to the Chamber of Secrets to start working on the warding stones for their Runic Fidelius Seal, as they had come to call it. Not wanting to stop for supper, the two Gryffindors asked Dobby to bring them some sandwiches to munch on. Around ten o'clock that evening, they managed to finish the last of the boundary stones.

After positioning the eight boundary ward stones around the Quidditch field, Harry and Hermione placed the hearthstone in the exact center of the field. Once the hearthstone was in place, Harry set up privacy wards several feet away from the field, so as not to interfere with what they were doing, while Hermione began taking out the tools they would be using to empower the stones and the Runic Fidelius Seal itself.

As soon as Harry returned, they quickly changed into plain white linen robes with a simple rope belt at their waist. Making sure to center and ground themselves, Harry and Hermione began the dual chant in the ancient tongue of the land, which they had devised to empower the hearthstone. The hearthstone would be the center focus and root of the seal.

Ancient Gods of the Land, Sky, and Sea,

We call upon you to bear witness to this Shrouded Rite.

Guide our hands, as we offer up our lifeblood

To empower this hearthstone.

By the powers of Earth, Air, Fire, and Water,

We give of ourselves to shield this place from view.

With that, both Harry and Hermione sliced open the palms of their hands with sacred daggers that they had empowered earlier in their studies of the journal which Dari Årmann had given them, and let their blood flow into the runic markings on the stone. As soon as the last runic carving was filled with the two Gryffindors' blood, the whole stone lit up in a bluish green light. A few seconds later the glow faded, but the runic markings still glowed with an ethereal light. Not wasting any time, Harry and Hermione filled two stone bowls with a mixture of both their blood. Each taking a bowl, Harry and Hermione began to enact a similar incantation at each of the eight other stones linking them to the hearthstone. Once this was completed, they returned to the hearthstone and each removed a stone medallion, with a Triskellion sigil carved into them, from around their necks. After placing the medallions on the hearthstone, Harry and Hermione place one hand on the hearthstone and the other on their respective medallion. They then intoned a final incantation to link the medallions to the hearthstone, and thus to the Runic Fidelius Seal they had created.

Once they placed the medallions back around their necks, Harry and Hermione placed a small offering of food and wine at the foot of the hearthstone. They then put their tools away and quietly left the Quidditch Field and returned to the Chamber of Secrets to go over the rite they had just completed. From what they could tell the Runic Fidelius Seal worked, but they would not know for sure until tomorrow, as the Slytherin Team had challenged a group of students from Durmstrang to a pickup game.

"Once more," Hermione pointed out, "if we did this right, we should be able to deactivate the stones and move them down here to the chamber, until the end of the term."

"From what I felt during the casting," said Harry, "I'm fairly certain everything worked out as we had hoped."

"You've got a point there, Harry," Hermione agreed. "I've never felt so alive and free before. It's like I was at one with everything."

"I know what you mean, Mione," Harry said with a nod. "According to the journal, the ancient druids referred to that feeling as being connected and at one with Nature. It's usually a good sign that what you are doing has been accepted by the natural forces."

Hermione nodded distractedly as she remembered reading something to that extent. Smiling at Harry, she left the room to check on the Felix Felicis potions she was brewing, while Harry checked on a Liquid Shadows potion he had brewing, along with some healing draughts they had going. After checking their respective potions, Harry and Hermione left the Chamber of Secrets to get some rest before classes the next day. Plus, they wanted to be awake to see the results of their work that night.

- Knockturn Alley -

Sirius had just exited Monte's Inferno when he suddenly felt drawn deeper into the alley. Soon he had reached the remains of Borgin and Burkes. Sensing something of interest inside the charred remains, Sirius climbed over some rubble and entered the shop. As he looked around the shop, a dark voice whispered to him.

Welcome mortal one, I sense power and ambition in you. I see you have succeeded in overcoming your darkest fears and have been reborn stronger. I would like to propose a partnership with you.

Intrigued with the offer, but wary, Sirius called out, "Show yourself, if you want to make offers of partnership."

Wisely said mortal, I am herethe voice said as a figure coalesced into a greenish red humanoid with dragon-like wings coming out of its back. I am called Drizt, and as I said, I have an offer to make you.

"Alright demon, as I gather that is what you are," Sirius replied. "You have my attention. What's your offer?"

You are correct in that I am a demon. My offer is as follows. I propose we merge our beings together. This will provide you with the following things: supernatural strength, a vast increase in power

and arcane knowledge, a good dose of magical resistance, heightened senses, and of course immortality. The downside is that as you would be partly demonic, holy items backed by faith would hinder you.

"Sounds appealing so far," Sirius stated. "What do you get out of this?"

A corporeal form and a permanent anchor in this realm. On the downside, should you managed to be permanently killed, I would perish as well. Essentially, I would be melding my incorporeal spirit with your living soul. Once the bond is completed, it can't be undone. You could never be stripped of any of your power, and I could never be banished back to the Abyss. On a side note, our bonding would free you from your bond to the half-souled creature who calls himself Lord Voldemort. His mark would remain, but he could no longer control or torture you through it.

Sirius knew while demons were among the few beings which could be considered truly evil, they were incapable of untruth. "Drizt, I, Sirius Orion Black accept your proposal of my own free will. May this partnership prove beneficial and profitable to us both."

With Sirius's acceptance, Drizt spread his wings and flew straight into Sirius Black.

- Hogwarts -

The next morning during History of Magic, Harry decided, as he'd be reading his history book later, to look into a topic for their independent study in Transfiguration. Thinking back on the previous year, Harry had an idea which should not only qualify as an acceptable proposal, but would definitely come in handy later on if they were successful. Using his Legilimency derived mindspeaking, Harry asked Hermione, Love, what do you think of the idea of becoming Animagus for an independent study?

Blushing, as she still wasn't used to hearing terms of endearments being directed at her, Hermione sent over their bond, If you had asked me that at the beginning of the year, I'd have said you were crazy to try something so advanced, but given our progress in magic so far, it sounds like a plausible idea. Not to mention useful. Now

pay attention to Professor Binns, Harry. We have a test next week on this material, Hermione replied.

Open your book to page 241. He's dictating from the textbook verbatim, Harry replied.

Doing as Harry suggested, Hermione opened her book and saw that Professor Binns was indeed dictating directly from the textbook. Seeing that taking notes on the lecture was pointless, as they had already purchased the lecture, Hermione put down her quill, and decided to follow most of her classmates' example and took a nap.

After an average day in Charms' class. Harry and Hermione head out to the courtyard which overlooked the Quidditch Field, to have a picnic lunch and to see the reaction of the Slytherins heading out for the pickup Quidditch game. As luck would have it, they did not need to wait long. The mass panic that ensued by the Slytherins, over the missing Quidditch field, was priceless.

"Well Mione, I'd say that, given the Slytherins' reaction, this qualifies as a successful test," Harry commented.

"I'm holding off any judgment until I see a professor's reaction," Hermione replied.

"True, that would give a better scale as to its ability," Harry agreed after a moment's thought. "If Dumbledore can't find it, I'd say it's a success."

Hermione agreed to that condition. The two Gryffindors then got comfortable and waited as they continued to eat their lunch. Shortly before their lunch period was over, Dumbledore could be seen heading outside followed by several members of the staff, including both Professor McGonagall and Professor Babbling. Using a long range hearing charm, Harry and Hermione listened in on their professors' conversation.

"I know we have a Quidditch Field here at Hogwarts, as we've held games here long before even I was a student, but I can not for the life of me remember where it is located," Albus Dumbledore stated as he looked around.

"I have to agree with you Albus," Minerva McGonagall stated, "as my house has won the Quidditch Cup during the last three years."

"Well this is a mystery, as I've cast every locating spell I know of and am unable to find it," Dumbledore replied.

"Normally, I'd chalk this up to an elaborate prank, but I can't think of any student who is this capable," Severus Snape commented.

"Severus," McGonagall chuckled, "for once we are in total agreement."

Both Filius Flitwick and Bathsheda Babbling were stumped, and they were the school's foremost experts in Charms and Wards. Neither of them could find a trace of anything which would suggest an illusion, or a shield of some kind, that was hiding the location of the Quidditch Field from everyone.

As the professors returned to the castle, Bathsheda caught Minerva's attention and they headed off separately from the others. When they were far enough away, the Ancient Runes professor turned to her old friend and stated, "I can't be positive, but I have a sneaking suspicion as to who is responsible for the missing Quidditch Field. If I'm right, then those two just received an Outstanding for their final grade."

At first Minerva did not know to whom Bathsheda was referring, but then she remembered a conversation they had had a while back about the fourth year Ancient Rune's class starting their final project early. Minerva's eyes widened as she realized exactly which students were being referred to. Sweet Merlin, if Bathsheda is right, then those two have managed to pull something off which is at least NEWT level work in that class. If I wasn't keeping an eye on those two before, I definitely am now.

"Bathsheda," Minerva replied, "do me a favor and keep this information to yourself. I don't want any of the other staff finding out about this."

"Sure Min," Bathsheda agreed. "But why? Is something going on which I should know about?"

"I'm not sure yet," Minerva answered, "but I get the feeling the less people who know what those two are up to, the safer they are. I'll have a talk with them to confirm our suspicions and let you know."

- Headmaster's Office -

Albus Dumbledore was impressed. The problem he had was that he had absolutely no idea who he was impressed with. Someone had managed to not only hide the entire Quidditch Field, but also managed to erase, from everyone's memory, where it was located in the first place. The only thing Albus could think of that could pull off such a feat was the Fidelius Charm. However, given the massive drain on one's magical core to perform the charm made it impossible for most wizards or witches to cast successfully. Out of everyone currently residing at Hogwarts, only himself and possibly Filius Flitwick could pull it off.

That only leaves the option that there is an outsider somewhere on the grounds, who has managed to remain undetected by the wards surrounding Hogwarts, thought Dumbledore as he sucked on a lemon drop. That points to a powerful wizard indeed, and that worries me, as I have no way of knowing whose side they are on.

The headmaster, at a loss of what else to check, decided to go and recheck the wards to see if he had missed anything which might indicate how the intruder got in. He also went to advise Moody he would need to increase his security checks as it appeared there was an intruder somewhere on the grounds.

- Gryffindor Common Room -

After a typical day in Potions, Harry and Hermione decided to lounge around in the Gryffindor Common Room for a bit, before dinner. Harry was sitting on one of the couches, reading *The Two Towers* by J.R.R Tolkien, while Hermione, laying down with her head in Harry's lap, was reading *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* by Lewis Carroll.

Unfortunately, their peace and quiet was soon disturbed when Ron came bursting through the portrait hole and bolted up the stairs toward the fourth year boys' dorm. Their unanswered question was soon answered when Ginny came barging into the Gryffindor Common room with a look which promised a slow and agonizing

death for anyone who got in her way. Looking at each other for a moment, Harry and Hermione quickly pointed toward the stairs and said, "He went that way."

Nodding in thanks, Ginny went up the stairs looking for Ron. A few minutes after Ginny had disappeared, the twins came running into the Gryffindor Common Room. After looking at Harry and Hermione's faces, the twins asked if Ron was still breathing.

"We're not sure," Harry replied. "As we haven't heard any screams or explosions, my guess is Ginny hasn't gotten to him yet."

"What did that idiot do this time?" Hermione asked with a concerned look on her face.

"Our dear youngest brother decided Neville, as he associates with the likes of you two, was not good enough for young Ginevra," Fred replied.

"He demanded that Neville break off the betrothal, so Ginny would be free to marry a more respectable wizard," George continued.

"Neville refused to, and further told Ron it was none of his concern as to whether Ginny and he were betrothed or not. Both his grandmother, and our parents had formally approved the match and betrothal document had already been signed and recorded. Furthermore, Neville told Ron he could take his idiotic opinions and go whine to someone who actually cared what he thought," Fred stated.

"Way to go Nev!" Harry exclaimed.

"Unfortunately, for Neville, as he and Ginny turned to go off somewhere away from Ron, our idiot brother threw a Reductor Curse at him," continued George. "Fortunately, Ron just winged him and Madam Pomfrey assured us that after a day's recovery in the hospital wing, Neville will be fully recovered."

"Unfortunately, for Ron, he didn't take into account Ginny's reaction to his attack. After we assured her, that we would get Neville to Madam Pomfrey, she went after Ron," Fred finished.

It was about this time Professor McGonagall came rushing into the Gryffindor Common Room. Seeing the look on her face, all four of the Gryffindors pointed up the stairs. "You might want to hurry professor, as the explosions are due any minute if I know Ginny," Hermione warned.

"We're staying down here where it's safer," replied the twins with both Harry and Hermione nodding in agreement. They all agreed there was probably something worse than getting in Ginny's way when she was angry, but they could not for the life of them come up with one.

At this point, right on cue, they heard explosions coming from the direction of the fourth year boys' dorm. "So any bets on the chances of Ron getting out of this in one piece?" George asked with a chuckle.

A short while later, Professor McGonagall came back down, levitating both Ginny and Ron in a Full-Body Bind. After releasing Ginny and telling her to go to her room and stay there until she returned, Professor McGonagall left with Ron still bound and very obviously looking like he was at the center of a couple of the explosions.

Leaving the Harry and the twins in the common room, Hermione walked up to the girls' dorm with Ginny. After getting to Ginny's room, Hermione sat down on the bed beside her and pulled her young friend into a hug, assuring her Madam Pomfrey confirmed Neville would be just fine after a day of recovering in the hospital wing.

"Regardless what happens with Ron, Ginny," stated Hermione. "I can assure you that Harry, the twins, and I will be there for you."

Still too upset and angry with her brother to speak, Ginny just nodded and just clung onto Hermione even tighter. Hermione began to rub Ginny's back in small circles in an effort to help her calm down.

Back in the common room, Harry and the twins were busy devising ways to pay Ron back for what he had done. "I say we hold off on doing anything until Monday, as Ron's birthday is then, and we really should do something special for the bloody git," Fred commented.

Nodding in agreement, Harry and George continued making notes on ideas to get even with Ron. They were still doing this when Professor McGonagall came through the portrait hole. Pausing before heading up the stairs, Professor McGonagall assured the three young men Ginny would not be punished at all by the school, as it was ruled she was defending her betrothed. Any punishments she received would be up to her parents. Ron's fate, however, was decidedly different. The only reason that Ron was not being expelled and his wand being snapped was due to the fact that Neville refused to press charges, stating that he was never in any danger from Ron. It was a well known fact, among the Gryffindor students, that Ron's aim was terrible. The fact that Ron was even able to get the Reductor Curse to actually work was impressive in of itself, as he had always been too lazy to put any effort into learning.

While he was not being expelled, Ronald would be serving detention every night for the rest of the year. He had also lost all Hogsmeade privileges for the remainder of the year, and was banned from playing Quidditch for the remainder of his time at Hogwarts. This was all on top of any punishments that Ron's parents came up with.

The twins cringed at hearing that part, having been on the receiving end of their mother's temper on more than one occasion.

After Professor McGonagall headed up the stairs to inform Ginny of the situation, and to let her know her parents were here and were asking for her, Harry and the twins continued their plotting. "I say his payback lasts all of next week," said Harry.

"Given the amount of ideas we've come up with," George replied, "that shouldn't be a problem."

"Neville should be in on this when he gets out of the hospital wing," Fred pointed out.

A few minutes later, Professor McGonagall came back downstairs followed by Ginny and Hermione. The twins asked if they could come along, as they wanted to fill their parents in on a few things that they were aware of. Once McGonagall was out of hearing range, Hermione turned to Harry and asked, "So what have you and the twins cooked up for Ron?"

Not even bothering to deny anything, Harry filled Hermione in on what they had planned for the coming week, starting on Ron's birthday. Hermione wholeheartedly approved and even went so far as to make some suggestions to improve the humiliation factor on a couple of the ideas. Afterward, they headed down to the Great Hall for dinner.

- Riddle Manor -

Voldemort was very pleased with his servant, Sirius Black. Not only had he managed to reclaim the Black Family Manor, located at Number 12, Grimmauld Place, but Sirius had succeeded in locating a ritual which would return him to his adult form and power. Sirius had also informed him he had managed to improve on the ritual to not only counteract the time he was forced to inhabit snakes and other creatures, but the physical degradation which had occurred due to the overuse of extremely dark magic. After making sure Kreacher was taking care of Lord Voldemort properly, Sirius left the manor to search out the necessary components required by the ritual: bone of the father, flesh from a loyal servant willingly given, blood of an enemy forcibly taken, nine souls ripped from the innocent, and the blood of a unicorn to bind them together. As all of the components, save the souls, were readily available, Sirius was on the hunt for nine children who had yet to know evil in their lives.

With his new found demonic abilities, Sirius was confident he would be able to remove and contain the needed souls. Plus, it would give him the time away from Voldemort to allow for the melding of himself and Drizt to strengthen and complete. Between the two of them, they had agreed that while they would keep their arrangement secret from Voldemort, they would not seek to overthrow him. Overthrowing Voldemort would, as a consequence, thrust them into the spotlight - something which neither of them wanted. They were content to remain in the background, gathering power and influence. Working from the shadows was something they were both comfortable with, and saw no reason to deviate from what worked.

Besides, Drizt commented, the person in charge tends to have a bulls-eye painted on him. Where as those of us in the background can always slip away if things get to dangerous.

Very true, Sirius agreed, and with that, they headed off in search of the needed souls.

- Hogwarts -

The following week at Hogwarts, was soon upon the students. Aside from the pranks against Ron, Harry and Hermione's week was fairly routine. As, they had deactivated the Runic Fidelius Seal on Sunday evening, the Quidditch Field was once again available. Although, being caught by the Fred and George coming out of a broom closet Wednesday afternoon caused quite the commotion in the Gryffindor House, and ended with Harry and Hermione having a stern lecture delivered to them by Professor McGonagall on what was and was not acceptable behavior. Minerva relaxed only slightly when the two Gryffindors assured her that things hadn't gone that far. If I didn't know any better, I'd have to say that Harry and Hermione were corrupting influences on each other, the former Gryffindor thought as she remembered another couple that went to Hogwarts not to long ago.

Thursday quickly came around and Harry and Hermione had finished their written proposal for their Animagus independent study for Professor McGonagall. As they had already shown they were capable of Wandless Magic, they felt they were knowledgeable enough to attempt such an advanced form of Transfiguration. What Professor McGonagall did not know, was that Harry and Hermione had access to not only James Potter's notes on how he, Sirius, and Peter became Animagus, but they had found other text regarding the process as well.

From their reading, Harry and Hermione found there were three ways to determine what your inner animal was, and learn how to change into it. The most common way, and the slowest way, was by drinking a complex potion which induced a dreamlike state where the drinker would go on an inner journey to discover their animal. Afterward, the wizard would then practice gradually transforming more and more of themselves into their animal. The whole process could take from as short as 6 months to as long as a year to complete. The second way was through the keeping of a dream journal, and analyzing what was found in them to determine which animal best fit the wizard's personality. As with the first method, this was followed by the gradual transforming of the wizard's body. As the wizard had a closer understanding of the animal, it usually took a shorter length of time to complete the process. Finally, the third way, which was the hardest method, but also the fastest, was meditation.

It was this third method, which Harry and Hermione were going to use.

This method consisted of the wizard getting into a relaxed state and turning their mind inward. Upon entering a deep meditative state, the wizard opened themselves up to the animal within them. Upon connecting with their animal, the wizard then began the task of communing with their animal. This process allowed the wizard to fully immerse themselves into every aspect of their animal, thus melding both their human side and their animalistic side into a more harmonious whole. This method was extremely difficult to accomplish, not to mention taking a great deal of magical power, physical energy, and willpower to be successful, as the wizard can be locked in this meditative state for three to five hours.

While this method could run the danger of draining the wizard to dangerously low levels, it had the advantage of allowing the wizard to more easily transform into their animal as the ability had become second nature to them. Wizards and witches who were successful at this method often completed the transformation in a month or less, depending on the animal in question.

Harry and Hermione had decided to attempt the meditative trance after DADA got out. Playing it safe, the two Gryffindors planned on doing this in the Chamber of Secrets, and with Dobby present to make sure they did not kill themselves in the attempt.

After Transfiguration class had ended, Professor McGonagall asked Harry and Hermione to stay behind for a few minutes.

"So you two," asked Professor McGonagall, "have you come up with a proposal for an independent study in Transfiguration?"

Stating they had, Hermione handed the professor the Animagus proposal they had come up with. As Professor McGonagall read through the proposal, she chuckled to herself. I should have guessed they would choose the Animagus Transformation. If it was anybody else, I'd probably lecture them on how they needed to master other forms of Transfiguration prior to attempting the Animagus Transformation. However, I think these two cubs might be able to pull it off.

"I'll accept this proposal, on one condition," Professor McGonagall replied. "While I believe you both are capable of successfully completing the Animagus Transformation, it is not something to be taking lightly or rushed. If you promise to be careful in your studying, I'll sign off on this proposal."

Readily agreeing, Harry and Hermione stated they would be looking into the dream journal method, as that would bypass the possible need to deal with Professor Snape in regards to the Animagus Potion. Professor McGonagall nodded in understanding, as she was well aware of Severus' animosity toward Gryffindors, and Harry in particular. She wished Harry and Hermione luck, and excused them to go off to lunch.

However, before they left the room, Professor McGonagall commented, "Oh and by the way, nice job with the Quidditch Field. Professor Babbling told me it earned you an Outstanding for your final grade."

This comment, as Minerva had hoped, had the desired effect of causing both Harry and Hermione freeze in their tracks. Turning around, with worried looks on their faces, they stated it was the best place they could think of to test their theory.

"Reasonable choice," Minerva stated. "That and you managed to throw Professors Flitwick and Babbling for a loop as to what to even check for. The Headmaster suspects some outsider had cast the Fidelius Charm on it, and is still trying to track them down. All in all, it was an excellent practical demonstration of your project, and as an added bonus, a delightful prank. Worthy of the Marauders."

Thanking her again, Harry and Hermione scampered off to the Great Hall to get a bite to eat before Defense Against the Dark Arts.

Lunch was fairly uneventful save for Ron turning into a menagerie of animals all through the meal. He stayed in one form for around five minutes before changing into another animal. As the whole school had heard what had happened between Ron and Neville, not many people had any sympathy for the Gryffindor. Those few who did sympathize with Ron, understanding his reasoning behind his actions, were primarily in Slytherin and a couple in Ravenclaw, although they felt Ron's timing could use some work. Ron, to his credit, took the prank like a Gryffindor and remained at the table and

finished eating his lunch, before heading back to the Gryffindor Common Room to grab his homework assignment for Defense class.

In DADA, Professor Moody continued his lecture on ways to deflect hexes. While Harry and Hermione were familiar with most of the techniques which Professor Moody lectured on, they did pick up a few tricks from the retired Auror. After lecturing for about the first half of the class, Professor Moody paired everyone off, save for Ron who was still cycling through animal forms, and had them practicing what he had gone over.

After class, Harry and Hermione snuck down to the Chamber of Secrets to begin their Animagus meditation. After eating a couple of sandwiches, Harry and Hermione settled down in a pair of comfortable chairs they had smuggled down there. After assuring Dobby that everything should be fine, but to monitor them just in case, Harry and Hermione began the meditation to connect with their inner animal as it was described in their texts.

- Harry's POV -

As Harry focused his mind inwards, he soon found himself by the swirling vortex which represented his magical core. Trusting his instincts, Harry once again allowed himself to be drawn into the vortex. Keeping his task firmly in mind, Harry soon found himself in what could only be described as an endless sea of Shadow. Deciding to explore for a bit, Harry began to wander around taking in all of what he was seeing. Given my elemental affinity to Shadows, I'm not surprised to find such a place as this. Being here, I understand why I always felt at home and comforted in the cupboard at the Dursleys. The shadows and darkness are like a warm blanket, comforting and protecting me from harm.

After a bit of walking, Harry came upon the entrance to a cave. Feeling that what he was searching for dwelt inside the cave, Harry entered and began to look around. Sure enough, in the back of the cave was what appeared to be a large sleeping feline which was of the darkest black Harry had ever seen.

As Harry moved closer to the animal, the cat opened its eyes and said, I have been waiting for you, young cub. It is good that we finally meet face to face. I've been with you for many a year, giving you comfort when I could. The shadows are a safe haven for the

both of us. You from your relatives, and me from those who would end my race's existence.

The big cat stretched as it got up, and then walked over to Harry. Sitting down on his haunches, the cat took on a regal air and stated in a formal manner, Many things will happen in the coming days, and we will need to be as one to survive and do what is needed of us.

What do you mean, 'What is needed of us'? Harry asked.

That knowledge, replied the cat, I do not possess. I simply know The Powers That Be saw fit to have us brought together for a purpose.

Who are The Powers That Be? Harry asked with a confused look on his face. Harry was a little fuzzy on spiritual matters as the Dursleys never took him to church, saying freaks like him were born damned.

You would call them gods. In this case, the ancient gods who have held sway over this land for thousands of years, the cat answered.

Vowing to himself, to learn all he could about the ancient gods, Harry then asked what the cat meant about the 'be as one' part. Harry suspected the cat was referring to the merging of the two of them into one being, but he figured it could not hurt to verify it. The cat answered Harry in the simplest way possible; it literally jumped into him.

As soon as the cat was completely inside Harry, the young Gryffindor's mind was assaulted with memories and knowledge of being the cat, which Harry immediately knew was an ancient and extinct race of large predator, which used to roam the hills and forests of Wales, called a Twilight Panther. The Twilight Panther, like Harry, possessed an innate connection to the element of Shadow, and would often make use of its Shadow Walking ability while hunting for food. After what seemed like hours, it was over and Harry was once again alone in the sea of Shadow. Knowing he had completed the task that he had come to do, Harry turned his mind outward and awoke from his meditative trance.

- Hermione's POV -

As Hermione turned her thoughts inward, she soon found herself by the raging sun which represented her magical core. Trusting her instincts, Hermione once again allowed herself to be drawn into the center of the sun. Keeping her task firmly in mind, Hermione soon found herself in what could only be described as a mountainous region, where lava flowed in rivers instead of water. Unaffected by the intense heat, Hermione decided to look around and explore. As she walked around, Hermione was amazed at what she saw.

I've never seen a place like this before, Hermione thought to herself. It's one of the most beautiful places I've seen. It almost feels like I'm coming home. After exploring for a while, occasionally dipping her hand into a river of lava and watching it as flowed around her hand, Hermione saw a fiery creature swoop down from the sky and land a short distance away from her. Knowing in her soul this was what she was looking for, approached the creature to get a closer look at it. As Hermione moved closer, the creature, which Hermione saw resembled a smaller version of a dragon, turned its head toward Hermione and said, I have been waiting for you, young fledgling. I sense that you are as comfortable in this realm as I am. This stands to reason, given our mutual connection to Fire. I began searching for you when I sensed you had entered this realm of Fire.

Walking over to Hermione, the small dragon stated in a formal tone, Many things will happen in the coming days, and we will need to be as one to survive and do what is needed of us.

What do you mean by 'what is needed of us'? Hermione asked.

As knowledgeable as I am, the creature stated, that knowledge I do not have. I only know The Powers That Be have us brought together for a purpose.

Who are The Powers That Be? Hermione asked with a confused look on his face. She was a little fuzzy on spiritual matters as her parents never went to church, stating that it was a waste of time.

You would call them gods. In this case, the ancient gods that have held sway over this land for thousands of years, the creature replied.

Deciding then and there, to do some serious research on the ancient culture of Great Britain, Hermione then asked what the creature meant about the 'be as one' part. Hermione thought that she knew

what the small dragon was referring to, but wanted to double-check. Without warning, the small dragon leaped toward Hermione and flew right into Hermione.

As soon as the fiery bird was completely inside Hermione, the young Gryffindor's mind was assaulted with memories and knowledge of being the creature. The first thing being what it was; a fire drake. Fire drakes were the smaller cousin of the dragon. They were known to be highly intelligent and possessing not only the fire breathing capability of their draconian cousin, but the fire traveling ability of the phoenix. These and other facts burned their way into Hermione's mind.

After what seemed like hours, it was over and Hermione was once again alone, surrounded by mountains. Knowing that she had completed the task which she had come to do, Hermione turned her mind outward and awoke from her meditative trance.

Slowly opening her eyes, Hermione saw Harry slouched in his chair. He was slowly drinking something Dobby had given him. Seeing Hermione awake, Dobby rushed over to her and gave her a glass of a pale green liquid. "This be an energizing drink that house elves be making for themselves as it helps restore energy lost from working hard."

Turning to Hermione, Harry simply stated, "Twilight Panther."

What Hermione knew of Harry's upbringing, coupled with the small bit about Twilight Panthers she had come across in her reading, made the fact that Harry's Animagus form was a Twilight Panther made sense and seemed to definitely fit. Nodding in agreement, Hermione shared what she was.

"Wow!" Harry said in amazement. "A Twilight Panther and a Fire Drake, we sure don't do normal, do we?"

"That has got to be the understatement of the year," Hermione said in agreement. "In all my research on Animagus, I never read anything about turning into magical creatures even being possible."

"Neither have I," Harry replied. "I guess this is another example of us not following the accepted rules."

As the two continued to slowly drink what Dobby had given them, Harry and Hermione compared what they had experienced. They both agreed mastering this new ability would take priority over everything except the journal which they continued to study from, their elemental abilities, and their advanced topics of Necromancy and Blood Magic.

Chapter 10: Revelations All Around

- Chamber of Secrets -

After finishing the energy drink which Dobby had given them, Harry and Hermione went to check on the Felix Felicis potion and the Liquid Shadows Potion. As both were close to being done, they separated and concentrated on the final steps of their respective potions. An hour and a half later, and the two Gryffindors were bottling their potions and placing them in their potions cupboard. After cleaning up their cauldrons, Harry and Hermione headed up to the Gryffindor Common Room to meet up with Neville and Ginny to study for Potions. Even though Ginny was a year behind them, she had been getting extra tutoring from Fred and George and, thus was ahead in her class. Ginny was fascinated with potions and what one could do with them, and even though Snape had it in for Gryffindors, Ginny was stubborn and determined enough to put up with his blatant favoritism and sabotage.

While they were in the library studying, Neville asked something he, Ginny, and the twins had been wondering about. "Not to be nosy or anything, but where is it that you've been disappearing off to?"

"Yeah," Ginny added with a sly grin on her face, "we hardly see you in the common room, and only slightly more in the library, not to mention both of you have missed several meals."

Looking at each other, they both quietly asked, "Who else has noticed?"

Chuckling, Neville replied, "I doubt any one else, save the twins, as they all think the worst of the both of you."

"Harry for managing to get entered into the tournament, and Hermione for siding with Harry," Ginny continued with a notable look of annoyance for the rest of her housemates .

"The only thing keeping the rest of the house from doing anything is Professor McGonagall's warning, and Fred and George have promised that anyone giving either of you two a hard time over the tournament will have volunteered to be test subjects for any new pranks they devise."

With a chuckle, Harry agreed that with both of those threats hanging over their heads, he could see why the rest of Gryffindor House had left them alone. "In answer to your question, Neville," Harry continued, "I've been training for the tournament, and Hermione has been helping me."

Ginny looked back and forth between Harry and Hermione for a couple of minutes before replying, "I know you two, and I get the feeling you're not telling us everything."

"Do either of you two know Occlumency?" Hermione asked.

Receiving a negative response from both of them, Harry stated, "It's not that we don't trust you, it's the fact that we don't trust everyone you come into contact with. Until you master Occlumency, you're safer not knowing."

"Why do I get the feeling, we're not going to like this?" Ginny replied.

"Let's just say your mother's normal response to you or your brothers getting into trouble would seem like a gentle reminder to behave, compared with her reaction to what Harry and I have been up to if she ever found out," Hermione said with a chuckle.

Ginny's face paled, and her jaw dropped, at this. "You're not doing something illegal, are you?"

Smiling, Harry assured her that everything they were doing was perfectly legal. Most of it is anyway, Harry thought.

Relaxing at this, both Ginny and Neville agreed to let the matter drop for now, and would try and run interference for them if needed. With the matter settled for the time being, the four Gryffindors finished up their Potions homework and then headed back to the Gryffindor Tower for the night.

- Wimbledon Village, London -

Sirius Black was having a lucky day, as far as he was concerned. So far, he had managed to steal the souls of three young children. All three of which were from Pureblood families, these being the Gamp, Blishwick, and Selwyn families. Sirius only needed six more souls to collect, and then he would be able to return Voldemort to his former

self. To keep things in balance, the remaining six would include three half-blood souls along with three Muggleborn souls. As the Muggleborn souls would be easier to locate, Sirius was after them next.

He had managed to find two promising candidates here in Wimbledon Village. That evening, sneaking around in his Animagus form, Sirius managed to sneak into the first house undetected due to a pet door which was built into the front door of the house. After judicious use of the Stunning Curse on the inhabitants of the home, Sirius took the young boy he had chosen, laid him on the floor, and woke him up. After reassuring the boy that he didn't mean him any harm, Sirius went on to explain he was an angel of sorts and had some bad news for him.

"It seems that a plague has swept through your village and taken several of the people. Your parents were among those taken," Sirius explained as he projected truth and sincerity toward the child.

"Mama and Daddy are gone?" the boy asked as his eyes teared up.

"I wish I could say otherwise, but it's true," Sirius answered. "I, and others like me, have been sent down from Heaven to explain what has happened and to offer those children, like you, who were left behind a choice."

"What kind of choice?" the boy asked.

"If you agree, I can take your immortal soul up to heaven with me, so that you can be reunited with your parents," Sirius replied.

"You mean I won't have to be alone?" the boy asked, as his face brightened with hope.

"That's right, you won't have to be alone," Sirius assured him.

"Then I agree Mr. Angel, I want you to take my soul with you," the boy said.

After putting the boy back in his bed and tucking him in, Sirius told the boy to close his eyes and in a few minutes he would be with his parents. Once the boy had closed his eyes, Sirius stunned the child again and gently laid him on the floor. Once the boy was positioned

correctly, Sirius began drawing arcane symbols and runes around the child. Sirius then took out a glass globe he had previously prepared, and began to intone an incantation in the dark demonic tongue. As he continued to chant, a foul smelling wind began and the child began to glow with a slickly red light. As the chant rose in pitch and intensity, the red glow around the child began to pulsate. A few minutes later, the glow subsided and a pale white mist rose out of the child. Sirius quickly brought forth the glass globe and with a sharp command drew the mist into it. After returning the body of the boy to his bed, he banished the symbols on the floor. Sirius then left the house, but not before removing the Stunning Curse he had used on the other inhabitants of the house.

That is one thing demons envy humans for; the ability to lie, Drizt stated. Some demons claim that they don't lie because it would show that they had to resort to trickery to get what they wanted. The truth of the matter is that while demons may have lost many of their angelic abilities and aspects during the Great Exile, we are still bound by the ancient laws set forth by our Creator.

It does come in handy, Sirius replied, especially since the ritual requires the victim to give up his soul freely.

With that, Sirius quickly went to the second house on his list, and repeated his angelic performance. He then Apparated to Palmers Green, London, where the third Muggleborn child lived.

- Hogwarts -

The next morning, Harry and Neville met Hermione and Ginny down in the Gryffindor Common Room and the four of them headed down to the Great Hall for breakfast. As she was eating, Hermione decided to page through her copy of Teen Witch. As she paged through the magazine, Hermione suddenly stopped at an article written by Rita Skeeter, entitled The-Boy-Who-Lived Is Officially Taken. Reading through the article, Hermione read Rita's account on how Harry was no longer on the Most Eligible Teen Wizard list stating that according to various sources at Hogwarts, Harry Potter and Hermione Granger have become an item, and it appeared the couple planned to keep it that way.

"Oh bloody hell," Hermione stated with annoyance, although her blushing didn't help her cause much.

"What's wrong Mione?" Harry asked, knowing full well what reporters could do with their blasted quills.

"I believe Hermione just came across the article about your relationship, Harry," Ginny answered as she tried unsuccessfully not to laugh.

"Why do I get the feeling I'm better off not knowing what's in the article?" Harry asked with a groan.

"Let's just say if we were trying to hide our relationship with each other, that is not going to be possible at all." Hermione said, still blushing.

"I know you both hate being in the spotlight," Ginny stated. "But look at it this way - at least the article should help cut down on any proposals either of you might receive."

"Proposals?" both Harry and Hermione asked.

"Marriage proposals," Ginny replied. "It's usually around your age when it starts, unless a betrothal contract was written up earlier."

"Ginny's right," Neville replied in agreement. "With Harry's status as the Boy-Who-Lived and Hermione's school standing, both of you would be open for proposals of all kinds."

"You mean Rita Skeeter actually wrote an article which has positive effects?" Harry replied.

"Surprisingly, yes," answered Neville.

"It still gets me that arranged marriages still happen in the Wizarding world," Hermione commented. "I mean, what if the two involved loathe each other?"

"It is a bit old fashioned," Ginny answered, "but so is most of the Wizarding world."

"That being said," Neville continued, "parents realize that forcing a marriage on two people who hate each other is just asking for problems and potential scandal."

Ginny went on to give a couple of examples of arranged couples, aside from her betrothal to Neville, who were currently students at Hogwarts.

I wonder what they would say, Harry, Hermione mindspoke, if they knew about our life bond?

Not sure, Mione, Harry replied. Should be interesting when we finally tell people.

Loud is a more appropriate term, dear, Hermione replied with a smile.

"Okay that's just creepy," Ginny stated, as she peered at the young couple with suspicion. "You two have the same look as the twins do when they're planning something."

Chuckling over that remark, Harry quickly changed the subject, inquiring whether Neville and Ginny's guardians had yet set a date for their wedding. This had the desired effect, in distracting both Neville and Ginny from pursuing the previous subject. After breakfast, Harry, Hermione, and Neville headed off to History of Magic, while Ginny left for Charms.

As Professor Binns was still lecturing out of the textbook, Harry and Hermione decided to finish writing up their final paper for Ancient Runes. How much detail do you think we should go into, Mione? Harry asked through their bond.

I'm thinking just enough detail to show we aren't making things up, but leave out the specific rune work and about the blood empowerment, Hermione replied after a moment.

I agree, and I'm thinking we should definitely leave out the wording of the rite we created, Harry added.

Hermione agreed with that, as it could cause problems with some people. By the time the class was out, the two Gryffindors had a rough draft of their paper completed. After dropping off their rough draft with Professor Babbling for review, Harry and Hermione headed to the Charms classroom early, so they could get some reading in before class. Charms class itself, was easy, as they had

already mastered the charms a while ago. The hard part, for Harry and Hermione, was convincing everyone else they were still using their wands. The one they were most worried about was Professor Flitwick, as there was a chance, due to his goblin ancestry, that he would be able to see what they were doing. Fortunately, the diminutive professor was kept busy with other students who were in need of assistance in performing the charms they had gone over in class.

Lunch was uneventful, save for the occasional glares from Ron. During the second half of their double Potion's class, Headmaster Karkaroff of Durmstrang came in to class and insisted on speaking privately with Professor Snape. As they were working on their potion, Harry and Hermione cast the long distance hearing charm on themselves to see if they could pick up what Headmaster Karkaroff wanted with Snape. Due to a privacy ward which Snape had put up, they were only able to catch snippets of the conversation - something about the mark becoming clearer and Karkaroff planning on going into hiding.

Do you think they're talking about the Dark Mark, Harry? Hermione asked through their bond.

That's my guess. I overheard Professor Moody muttering the other day, about having to two known Death Eaters on the property was limiting his security option. Harry replied.

It still gets me that Professor Snape is allowed to teach here given his record. I didn't know Headmaster Karkaroff was a Death Eater, Hermione sent with a note of annoyance.

Apparently, he was able to get a reduced sentence by giving up the names of other Death Eaters, Harry replied.

Once class was over, Harry and Hermione headed to the Chamber of Secrets, after stopping by the kitchens for some sandwiches. The two Gryffindors were excited, as Dobby had informed them earlier that he had acquired all the necessary materials they needed to construct their staffs. Even though they had essentially lost the ability to use a wand to perform magic, not that they needed wands at this point, the more complex rituals and incantations used in advanced Necromancy and Blood Magic required the use of a staff to help channel the magical energy required.

While the components which would make up the cores of their staffs were stewing in cauldrons to bind them together, Harry and Hermione worked on carving the shafts of their staffs. While Harry was crafting his staff with Necromancy in mind, Hermione was crafting hers to handle the energies associated with Blood Magic. After about an hour's work, they had completed the shafts and were waiting for the core materials to finish. When the core materials were finished, Harry and Hermione went through the steps to combine the shafts with their respective cores. Harry's staff received the mixture of Dementor's blood, Thestral scales, and lethifold skin, while Hermione's received the mixture of the blood of a Hungarian Horntail Dragon, salamander scales, and liquid fire. As a final step, after affixing the capstones onto the staffs, both Harry and Hermione performed a blood bonding ritual with their staffs to not only complete the final seal on the staffs but to bond the staffs to themselves.

Upon completion of the blood bonding ritual, the obsidian capstone on Harry's staff took on an ethereal glow, while the ruby capstone on Hermione's staff seemed to pulse with a deep red glow.

"Wow!" Harry said as he held his completed staff in his hands.

"I know. I can't believe we managed to complete them on the first try." Hermione exclaimed.

"Given all we've been through since coming to Hogwarts," Harry stated, "I'm for forgetting the word 'impossible' exists."

Thinking back on their previous three years, and what all had happened to them during this term, Hermione had to agree with Harry, I need to remember to be open-minded more often, Hermione thought to herself.

As it had been a long day already, Harry and Hermione decided to hold off on testing their staffs until the following day. As Ron was still fuming about the pranks pulled on him during the week, the two Gryffindors decided to crash for the night in the Chamber of Secrets, on a conjured bed. As the young couple settled into bed, snuggled up to one another, they separately came to the realization that sleeping as a couple was infinitely better than sleeping alone. By the

time they were asleep, Harry had his arm around Hermione, while she had her head nestled on his chest.

- Professor Snape's Office -

While Harry and Hermione were in the Chamber of Secrets advancing their knowledge of magic, Ronald Weasley was in Professor Snape's office giving his report on the potions project, under the guise of serving detention.

"So what you are saying, Mr. Weasley, is that this potion your great uncle had developed was to be used to weaken the undesirables in the Wizarding population?" Professor Snape inquired.

"That's correct, sir," Ron replied. "Essentially, what it does is disrupts the drinker's ability to perform magic by temporarily dampening their connection with their magical core. As the stronger the initial connection, the less effective the potion is, it would only be detrimental to Muggleborns and a few of the weaker Half-bloods."

"How long is temporary?" asked Snape.

"From the notes in my great uncle's journal, the effects can range from a day to a couple of weeks, depending on the strength of the connection being affected," Ron answered.

"A reasonable approximation," Snape commented. "Given your currently potions making ability, it appears the potion is relatively easy to make."

"Yes, and no sir," Ron confessed. "While the brewing process is fairly straight forward, although lengthy, the main hurdle to overcome is that the ingredients themselves are not easy to come by."

"Thus the lack of any serious testing, on the part of your great uncle," Snape surmised.

"As from what I've read, and heard from family, Artus Weasley was an accomplished Potions Master, lack of funding and ingredients seem to be the reason," Ron agreed.

"Given what you have shown me so far, you have my permission to continue with further development and testing of the potion," Snape said with a smile.

"Thank you, sir," Ron replied respectfully. "I'm glad for the chance to be able to use my talents more openly."

"You mentioned you would explain this sudden improvement in your abilities, yet they don't seem consistent with your current grades," Snape said as he motioned for Ron to take a seat.

"I would be happy to reveal my little secret, sir," Ron stated taking the seat offered. Settling into the chair, Ron went on to explain that the Ronald Weasley everyone - including his family - saw was merely an act used to stay out of the spotlight. He had learned at an early age, from watching his older brothers, that if you appear talented and intelligent, then people paid more attention to you, thus making it hard to do things other than what was acceptable. Ron surmised that if he appeared lazy and thickheaded, then people would pay less attention to him, making it easier for him to learn things outside the prying eyes of his parents and teachers. That was one of the reasons why he always slept in late, as he was studying on his own at night.

"Why on earth didn't the Sorting Hat put you in Slytherin?" Snape asked amazed at the level of cunning and foresight which Ronald Weasley had shown.

"Because I insisted it sort me into Gryffindor like the rest of my family. I figured that way, I would seem to be conforming to everyone's expectations. Surprisingly enough, the hat listened and agreed with my request."

"I must say, I am impressed," Snape replied, "and I don't impress easily."

"Thank you, sir," Ron said.

"I would like to make one suggestion. Do not under any circumstances blow either your O.W.L exams or your N.E.W.T exams. You'll need both of those to get into a decent field, or go on for a mastery in a subject."

"Thank you for the advise, sir." Ron stated as he hadn't thought that far ahead yet.

After arranging a schedule for Ron to continue with his research and testing, Professor Snape excused Ron to go off to either finish his homework or turn in for the night. Once the young Gryffindor had gone, Snape headed immediately to his personal study to write a letter to both Lucius Malfoy and Sirius Black informing them of the level of deception the young Gryffindor had succeeded at, and the nature of young Weasley's independent study in Potions. Severus Snape was certain that when the Dark Lord returned to power, the Death Eaters would have a new weapon in their arsenal.

- Chamber of Secrets -

The next day, being Saturday, saw most of the student body taking advantage of the weekend and sleeping in. For Harry and Hermione, however, it was going to be a busy day. The morning consisted of their usual morning workout, along with experimenting with their new staffs in the Chamber of Secrets. Deciding to play it safe they held off on exploring further into the practical aspects of Necromancy and Blood Magic until Easter break, when they would be able to leave Hogwarts without attracting too much attention.

That afternoon, Harry and Hermione joined the rest of the students going to Hogsmeade. Their first stop was at Gladrags to buy the most lurid pair of socks they could find for Dobby as a gift for all the help he had provided lately. Next on their list was a trip to Scrivenshaft's Quill Shop, where they stocked up on parchment, quills, and ink, carefully ensuring their purchases would last them for the rest of the term, especially with the amount of extra studying and research they were doing. They were leaving Scrivenshaft's when they were joined by their friends – the three Weasleys with whom they were still friendly, along with Neville, and upon Ginny's suggestion, accompanied them to The Three Broomsticks where they enjoyed a delicious lunch. Fred and George's antics while at the inn were particularly amusing – they spent the entire time eating making underhanded comments and jokes about many of the male diners, who they noticed staring and in some cases drooling over the beautiful Madam Rosmerta. Needless to say, the other four found their comments to be hilarious, causing them to take much longer to finish their lunch than they had originally planned.

The rest of the weekend went by quickly as Harry and Hermione continued with their studies, training, and general avoidance of Ron, so they would be less tempted to hex him. Dobby loved the socks they gave him, especially when he was reassured they were not breaking their bond with him. They wanted to give him something in thanks for all he had done for them, and knew he loved colorful socks.

The next few weeks went by without incident, save for the Hex Deflection test they had in DADA and a general test in Charms. When the Weasley twins birthday came around, ironically on April 1st, Harry and Hermione gave them several pranks, both Muggle and Magical, along with a gift certificate to one of the better apothecaries in Diagon Alley to help restock their supply of ingredients for their own pranks. Suffice to say, Fred and George were very happy with the gifts. For the next few days, the Weasley twins were not to be found, save for their regular classes. This fact did not go unnoticed by the members of Gryffindor House or their head of house. As it was Fred and George Weasley, most chalked it up to the two pranksters holing up and devising new pranks. As long as they attended their classes, Professor McGonagall would not interfere.

- Headmaster's Office -

Albus Dumbledore was in a very good mood. He had just gotten the list of students who were staying at Hogwarts over the Easter break and Harry Potter's name was on it. He was only mildly concerned to see the Granger girl was also staying over the break, but as the two of them shared several classes together, it was not surprising she would stay behind. Probably to work on projects and the like, the headmaster thought. The main thing was the Potter boy was staying. This would give him a chance to take a trip to Surrey and have a talk with the Dursleys. Albus needed to make sure they continued to neglect and isolate the boy over the summer. He also needed to reassure them their monthly payments would be restarting as soon as he cleared up the error at Gringotts.

That issue in itself is bothersome. I need the Dursleys to be well paid for their services, so they won't start thinking about going back on their promise. The goblins had no authority to stop those payments, as they were set up by James and Lily to provide for Harry if something should happen to them. As Harry was never told

about the payments, the goblins wouldn't be aware of the fact that the conditions of the payments had been breached, Albus thought. Just another reason for me to pay a visit to Gringotts after this term is over. If I can't get this mess straightened out, I'll have to start pulling money from my own vault to pay the Dursleys.

Putting the matter aside for now, Albus Dumbledore looked back on the previous three years at Hogwarts and was pleased at how his plans had borne fruit. During Harry Potter's first year, Dumbledore managed to lure him into "protecting" the Sorcerer's Stone, and thus allowing Tom Riddle to once again set his focus on the last scion of the Potter Family. During the boy's second year, Albus used the boy to smoke out who was controlling the Basilisk. This allowed him to get Lucius Malfoy off the Hogwarts Board of Governors, and made Arthur and Molly Weasley indebted to him for keeping young Ginevra's part in the affair a secret. Last year, while unforeseen, achieved the affect of hurting Cornelius Fudge's public standing as the Ministry failed to recapture Sirius Black. Albus was certain that Sirius Black was either looking for his old master, or he had found Tom Riddle's spirit and was looking for a way to return the Dark Lord to his body and former power.

As Albus knew there were dark rituals out there which would grant Tom Riddle a new body, he felt it was only a matter of time before Tom fully returned and gathered his scattered followers back to him. Keeping Potter weakened, isolated, and trusting was essential. Once Tom Riddle had disposed of the Potter boy, he would believe he had destroyed the only person with the power to kill him. With Harry Potter out of the way, Tom Riddle would become complacent and eventually let down his guard. This would allow Albus to enter the picture once again as the Beacon of Light and Vanquisher of Dark Lords. The only minor setback to his grand plan was gaining access to the Potter Vaults. Before the final move took place, Albus needed to gain access to the them to ensure the wealth and knowledge they contained was not lost to him.

- Gryffindor Common Room -

Easter Break was soon upon the students and those going home for the holidays were finishing up their packing and heading down to Hogsmeade to wait for the Hogwarts Express. As most of Gryffindor was leaving, Harry and Hermione were left to themselves for the most part. After seeing the Weasleys, minus Ron, and Neville off,

Harry and Hermione headed down to the Chamber of Secrets to practice the Animagus training for a few hours before it was supper time, as they needed to be seen still at Hogwarts.

Dinner itself, was quiet due to the lack of students present. After Harry and Hermione had finished eating, they headed up to Gryffindor Tower to get ready for their clandestine meeting with Griphook at Gringotts. Griphook's reply to Harry's letter had arrived last week and he agreed to meet with them after normal banking hours, for a nominal fee, to help facilitate the image that the two Gryffindors were remaining at Hogwarts. Given the Griphook's current attitude toward Albus Dumbledore, he had no issues with helping the two young humans continue getting out from under Dumbledore's control. The only reason it had taken this long to arrange for the testing was, due to the complexity of the test; it had to be approved by the Goblin High Council before being performed on non-goblins.

Around an hour after curfew, Harry snuck down to the Gryffindor Common Room and met up with Hermione. After using the Marauder's Map to make sure the staff were in their rooms for the night, Harry and Hermione Shadow Walked and Fire Flashed to an alley near Gringotts. After Disillusioning themselves, Harry and Hermione made their way to the entrance of the bank. As Griphook's letter stated the bank doors would temporarily let them into the bank after hours, they opened the doors slightly and quickly entered the building, shutting the door behind them. After removing the Disillusionment Charm, Harry and Hermione made their way to where they remembered Griphook's office was located. Upon knocking on the office door, a voice called out in Gobbledegook, "Come in Lord and Lady Potter, you are expected."

As they entered the office, they saw that Griphook was sitting at his desk. Waving them to have a seat, Griphook began, "It is my understanding the both of you wish to have the Ingenium Magus Ritual performed to determine what magical talents you've been blessed with."

"That is correct sir," Hermione confirmed. "With the blocks on our magical core and ability removed, we've noticed certain things have occurred that hadn't previously. Given our current mistrust of certain wizards, we felt that the best people to turn to for advice was the goblins."

"Save for the goblins, every other magical race that might be able to assist us in learning what has been hidden from us, has been less than honest. Our friend Dobby, a house elf, recommended that we contact you in regards to our situation," Harry continued.

Turning to his fellow goblin, Griphook stated, "This is why I petitioned the High Council for permission to have the ritual performed for them. Not only do they trust the goblins over their elder wizards, but they call a house elf, 'friend', and seek his opinion on matters."

With a nod, the goblin admitted there may be hope for the humans yet. Then, stating he had other business to attend to, the goblin left Griphook's office. Getting up from his desk, Griphook motioned for the two Gryffindors to follow him. He led Harry and Hermione through a labyrinth of corridors for several minutes, before the three of them entered a room with a large jade obelisk coming up from the ground in the exact center of the room. As they approached, Harry and Hermione could see various markings cut deep into the jade of the obelisk and could feel the power radiating off of the artifact. Griphook secured the door from outside intrusion, and proceeded to explain the ritual to the curious young couple. It seemed to be a very simple ritual from their point of view – all that was required of them was to open both palms with a knife, and then place their bloody palms on the obelisk allowing their blood to stain the jade surface. Griphook would then intone an ancient goblin chant which would activate the obelisk, and allow it to draw from their blood an understanding of the various magical talents they possessed, which would be revealed to them by the markings carved into the obelisk. Griphook warned them in a serious tone that the ritual would cause them to experience mild discomfort, but told them it would not be anything they would not be unable to handle. Then Griphook would record the various markings for them, and then intone another chant to clean and reset the obelisk.

Harry volunteered to go first and, after slicing both his palms with a dagger Griphook provided, placed his now bloody hands onto the jade obelisk. Soon after Griphook started to chant, Harry learned that a goblin's version of mild discomfort equated to searing pain for a human. Making heavy use of his Occlumency skills, Harry managed to keep his hands firmly planted on the obelisk. Around five minutes later the markings on the obelisk began to reshape

themselves. As soon as it was apparent that the reshaping had finished, Griphook instructed Harry to remove his hands from the obelisk. Commending the young wizard on his pain tolerance, Griphook healed the cuts on his hands and conjured a drink for him. Brace yourself love, goblin's have an extremely high tolerance for pain, Harry warned Hermione through their bond, as they waited for Griphook to finish translating the markings before resetting the obelisk for Hermione. It was soon Hermione's turn and, as with Harry, she had to make full use of her Occlumency skills to keep her hands on the obelisk until Griphook instructed her to remove them.

After translating the markings coinciding with Hermione and resetting the obelisk, Griphook handed each of them a sheet of folded parchment listing what had been revealed by the ritual. "Per goblin law, I have recorded the results of both rituals in our records. Have no fear of anyone else learning about them, as the records are only accessible to the High Council, and given their disdain for Wizarding folk, the likelihood of them revealing the information contained in them is about as likely as Lord Malfoy publicly proclaiming his undying love for all things Muggle. I do request that you hold off reading the results until you are back at Hogwarts. This way the goblins can say you did not learn anything while in Gringotts. I don't think it will be an issue, but to borrow an apt Muggle phrase, 'An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure'."

Nodding their understanding, Harry and Hermione thanked Griphook for his time and followed him out of the room. After Disillusioning themselves, Harry and Hermione left the bank and returned to Hogwarts by the same way they left. Back at the castle, the two went to the Chamber of Secrets to read over the parchments they had received.

When Harry opened up the parchment and looked at Griphook's even script, it read as follows:

This is a copy of the result of the Ingenium Magus Ritual done on this day the sixteenth of April in the year nineteen hundred ninety-five. Authorized by the High Council of the Goblin Nation and performed by Griphook, Senior Banker and Account Manager for the Potter Family. The original document was sent to High Council records.

Name: Hadrian James Potter

Age: 15

Blood Status: Half-Blood

Mother: Lillian Marie Potter née Evans

Father: James Edward Potter

Magical Potential: Archmagus

Magical Gifts: Allspeaker, Animagus, Beastspeaker, Elemental Connection to Shadows, Necromantic Affinity, Wandless Magic(full use)

Note: The subject has formed a life bond with another. As such the normal guardian authorization was not required nor desired by the subject. Full confidentiality measures authorized and have been paid for in full by the subject.

"Whoa," Harry said as he leaned back in his chair. "Looks like we were right, Mione, when we thought the blocks were holding us back. If your results are anything like mine, then our training needs to be bumped up a notch."

Hermione did not answer as she was just staring at the parchment Griphook had given her. As with Harry's, it was written in the goblin's even script. It read:

This is a copy of the result of the Ingenium Magus Ritual done on this day the sixteenth of April in the year nineteen hundred ninety-five. Authorized by the High Council of the Goblin Nation and performed by Griphook, Senior Banker and Account Manager for the Potter Family. The original document was sent to High Council records.

Name: Hermione Jean Potter née Drake

Age: 15

Blood Status: Half-Blood

Mother: Jean Elaine Drake

Father: Marcus Sean Connors

Magical Potential: Archmagus

Magical Gifts: Allspeaker, Animagus, Beastspeaker, Elemental Connection to Fire, Sanguine Affinity, Wandless Magic(full use)

Note: The subject has formed a life bond with another. As such the normal guardian authorization was not required nor desired by the subject. Full confidentiality measures authorized and have been paid for in full by the subject.

"Our training is definitely getting bumped up a notch," Hermione agreed. "I am so looking forward to the end of the term when Griphook sends our dear headmaster the letter informing him of the charges Gringotts is filing against him."

"Not to mention all the fines and compensation, he'll have to make good on," Harry said with a wide grin on his face. "Just thinking about all that bastard has done to us makes it harder to consider returning here next term."

"I agree," Hermione said, snuggling up to Harry. "I'm of the mind to take Dari Àrmann up on his offer. Not only would we be away from here but, if the journal is any indication, we would also be truly learning the magical arts as it was taught ages ago."

"I can't argue with you, love," Harry said as he pulled Hermione closer. Not wanting to bother heading back to the Gryffindor Tower, Harry and Hermione went to sleep in the Chamber of Secrets. The remainder of the Easter break was spent practicing their Animagus transformations and delving deeper into Necromancy and Blood Magic.

By the end of the holiday, Harry had learned to extend his senses out and feel the forces of Death. He had learned the act of summoning and binding spirits, as well as harming or even exorcising them. Harry and also began to learn the theory behind some of the darker aspects of the Necromantic Art, such as the creation of Inferi and skeletal creatures, as well as the summoning of lesser wraiths.

For her part, Hermione expanded on her knowledge of Blood Magic. As with Harry, she succeeded in extending her senses out and feeling the presence of blood, much like how vampires sensed their victims. She could now control the flow of blood in herself as well as others. Hermione had also learned how to empower both wards and other defensive charms with her blood to increase their strength. Hermione's current projects were learning how to tailor potions to specific people and delving into the controversial practice of blood runes.

- Headmaster's Office -

Albus Dumbledore was both pleased with this holiday break and seriously annoyed at the same time. On one hand, his meeting with the Dursleys had gone exceptional well. They assured Albus they had no intention of changing how they treated Harry, as they had grown used to having a live-in servant. Vernon, understanding the difficulties one can have when dealing with ethical banks, accepted that there would be a delay in payments. Albus assured them all back payments would be honored as well, and thanked them for their understanding of the situation. The fact that I didn't even have to use magic on them was even better, thought Albus. However, the Dursleys aside, Albus had still not gotten anywhere with the goblins in regards to the Potter Family account. They had even gone so far as stating that if Albus brought up the situation again, Gringotts would start fining him for wasting their valuable time. It seems the only way to gain access to the vaults is through the boy, but that would entail revealing their existence to him. As much as I hate losing that access, it appears the Potter wealth and artifacts are truly beyond my reach until Harry's death. Even after his death, it will be tricky, but doable. Setting this problem aside for the time being, Albus left his office to attend the staff meeting to go over things prior to the start of classes after the holiday break.

- Riddle Manor -

Lord Voldemort was very pleased with his servant Sirius Black. He had just been informed by Black that the time when he would be returned to an adult form and his full power was drawing close. Sirius had been successful in his mission to obtain all but one of the necessary components for the ritual which would achieve Lord Voldemort's return. Sirius had informed him that during the time of the last event of the Tri-Wizard tournament begin held at Hogwarts,

they would be able to obtain the last needed component: the blood of an enemy forcibly taken. Soon the blood of the last scion of the Potter Family will herald my return, and the Wizarding World will once again tremble with fear, Lord Voldemort thought as he began to make plans for when he regained an adult body.

- Gryffindor Common Room -

Harry and Hermione for the first time since the start of Easter break were relaxing in their house's common room. At the moment they were listening to Ginny tell them about what she did over the Easter break. Neville's grandmother decided that if both Ginny and Neville wanted to seriously pursue their choice of careers, Ginny as a Potions Mistress and Neville as an Herbologist/Apothecary, they would need better training in potions. To that end, she had arranged for the two of them to be tutored in Potions throughout the coming summer.

"That's great Ginny," Hermione replied. "I know both of you are having issues with Potions class due to Professor Snape's attitude toward Gryffindor."

"Which is exactly why Neville's grandmother is hiring a Potions Master from outside of Great Britain. She is currently looking at one from Tibet and one from Japan," Ginny continued. "As both countries have a long tradition regarding potions and herbs for both magical and Muggle uses, she feels we would get a first rate education from either of them."

"Where is Neville, out of curiosity?" Harry asked.

"He went to the greenhouses to transplant some magical plants he brought from home, as he wants to experiment with them to see if he can alter some of their properties."

"That's Neville for you," Harry said with a laugh. "When it comes to plants, there isn't much he can't do if he puts his mind to it."

"Not to ruin the good mood," Hermione mentioned. "But what's Ron been up to?"

"Nothing but trouble if you ask me," Ginny replied with an annoyed huff. "He spent most of the time up in his room, unless he was

outside riding his broom. I do know he's been in contact with Draco, as I saw him sneaking out a couple of times to meet up with the white ferret face. From what I saw both times, Draco would portkey to just outside out property wards and the two of them would talk for about an hour before Draco would portkey back to where ever he came from. I couldn't make out what they were talking about, just that something big is going to be happening."

"Probably has something to do with the last task for the Tri-Wizard tournament," Harry surmised. "With all the foreign dignitaries and Ministry people there, it would be the perfect time for the Death Eaters to pull something off."

"Good point, love," Hermione agreed. "Hopefully the Ministry or Dumbledore realize it as well."

"With few exceptions, the Ministry couldn't find their collective arses – even with directions and a road map," Harry said with irritation.

The three of them had a laugh over Harry's remark. Eventually they were joined by the Weasley twins and Neville. While Ginny and Hermione went off to talk about "girl things" as they put it, the boys decided to play a few games of Exploding Snap before dinner. Fortunately, Ron was nowhere to be seen.

The next day, classes started up again, and soon the halls of Hogwarts were back to their usual state of business and such. Over the next four weeks, Harry and Hermione continued with their normal training regime and on the evening of May 22nd, they managed to successfully transform into their Animagus forms. As it was a Saturday evening, they spent the remainder of the night getting used to their new forms and exploring what all they were capable of. While Hermione took to the sky and explored the area around Hogwarts, Harry prowled around inside the Forbidden Forest.

"This is amazing, Mione!" Harry exclaimed as they rested after returning from their exploring.

"I know what you mean, love," Hermione stated. Looking around, Hermione noticed something and asked, "Is it just me, or do your senses seem sharper than before."

"It's not just you," Harry assured her. "I read for those Animagus who fully integrate with their animal, they often will gain the animal's enhanced senses and reflexes even in human form. I've already noticed my eyesight has drastically improved. I'll need to change the lenses in my glasses into plain lenses, so I can hide the fact that I don't need them anymore."

"Good point," Hermione agreed. "People will start asking questions if you suddenly stop wearing your glasses."

"It will only be for a little more than a month, then I can just get rid of them," Harry said as he looked up at the sky with a contented look on his face. The Dursleys are on their own, Harry thought. Good riddance to them.

Realizing what Harry was talking about, Hermione wrapped her arms around him as she said, "After this term is over, we'll meet with Dari Àrmann and take him up on his offer. As the man seems to have more issues with Dumbledore than we do, I doubt we'll be anywhere near here." Nodding in agreement, Harry returned Hermione's hug. With that, the two Gryffindors headed back into the castle for the night, with a skip in their steps as if a weight had been lifted from their shoulders.

As was becoming their habit, Harry and Hermione crashed in the Chamber of Secrets. Since the two Gryffindors were of the habit of waking early to run, none of their dorm mates noticed they hardly slept in the Gryffindor dorms. The five that did, kept their peace. Ginny, Neville, and the twins figured either they were off training, studying, or trying to get a few minutes alone together.

Ron tried using this as an example of how Harry was obviously flaunting the fact that, as the Boy-Who-Lived, he did not have to follow the same rules as everyone else. His siblings, upon hearing this garbage, told Ron to either get his head out of his arse, or to keep his idiotic opinions to himself. Ron, feeling that he was in the right, stated he was going to inform Professor McGonagall about Harry and Hermione's absence. This resulted in Ron being shoved up against the wall by Neville, and being told in no uncertain terms, that if Ron followed through with his threat, then Neville would see to it that the entire Gryffindor House was notified how Ron had betrayed one of their own to a professor. Ron, getting a good look at the determination in Neville's face, stated he would keep his mouth

shut. Knowing Ron, Ginny forced him at wand point to swear a magical oath to that effect.

The following week went by uneventfully until Thursday evening at dinner time. Ludo Bagman was present at the staff table. Once dinner was over, he called for the four champions to follow him onto the Quidditch Field, where he would explain the third and final task of the Tri-Wizard tournament. After the champions had all arrived on the Quidditch Field, accompanied by most of the other students, Ludo Bagman began, "As you can see behind me is the beginnings of a giant hedge maze, which Mr. Rubeus Hagrid assures me will be close to eight feet high by June 24th, when the Third Task will occur. The goal of this task is to make your way through to the center of the maze. The first champion to reach the center and touch the Tri-Wizard trophy, which will be placed there, will be declared the winner and receive 100 points. The next champion to reach the center will receive 75 points, and so on. To make the maze more challenging, various creatures, traps, and the like will be scattered throughout the maze. Given the two sets of point ties which we have, Harry Potter and Victor Krum will enter first from opposite sides of the maze, and five minutes later Cedric Diggory and Fleur Delacour will enter the maze from the remaining two sides."

With this final announcement, Ludo Bagman dismissed the champions for the evening. Meet me in the Chamber of Secrets, love, Harry sent to Hermione as he made his way off the Quidditch Field. Making his way to the library, Harry quickly lost himself amongst the bookcases of the Restricted Section. After confirming he wasn't being watched, Harry stepped into a shadow and emerged in the Chamber of Secrets. A few seconds later, he was joined there by Hermione.

Chapter 11: The Third Task and Voldemort's Return

- Chamber of Secrets -

Sitting down on a couch, Harry and Hermione discussed what they had just heard from Ludo Bagman, in regards to the third and final task of the Tri-Wizard Tournament. "The whole maze idea reminds me of that Greek myth about the Minotaur," Harry commented as he took out a piece of parchment and began to draw something. Periodically, he would pause for a moment before continuing.

Remembering the Greek myth Harry had mentioned, Hermione stated, "It was the one involving Theseus. He and several others had been selected as a annual sacrifice to the Minotaur. The maze in which the Minotaur was held, was owned by King Minos of Crete." Thinking about it for a moment, Hermione added, "You're right Harry, the similarities are disturbing."

"Fortunately," Harry said with a smile, "if I can get this charm right, I should have my own version of a magical ball of yarn."

"Oh?" Hermione asked as she looked over at what Harry had been drawing. Hermione was amazed when she saw a copy of the maze's layout forming on the parchment, as Harry appeared to be drawing it from memory. As Hermione continued to watch, Harry finished the last bit of the maze layout. Setting his quill down, Harry next placed his hand on the newly drawn map and began to push his magic into the parchment as he envisioned what he wanted. The map began take on a deep blue glow for a few minutes, before fading away. Sensing that he was successful, Harry smiled as he rolled up the map and tucked it into his robes.

"That modified 'Point Me' charm you showed me earlier this year, love, gave me the idea to see if I could adapt it to creating a updating map of the maze. While this version won't show where the other champions or creatures are, it'll at least keep me from getting lost."

"The map should eliminate at least one of your problems," Hermione said with a nod. "Unfortunately, as to the other champions and whatever creatures are put into the maze, all you can do is rely on your training."

With that, the two Gryffindors got out their Charms and Potions textbooks and started to work on their homework which was due the next day. As they only had to finish up a few more lines on either essay, it did not take them long. Once they had finished up their essays, Harry and Hermione decided to stop by the kitchens and see how Dobby was getting on, and to enlist the house elves assistance in a little prank they had planned. At first Hermione was opposed to any form pranks, but after Harry pointed out that not only would it be a fun way to practice, but it would throw a little chaos into the mix, hopefully providing enough distractions for the staff and the headmaster to deal with. This would result in the professors having less time to notice anything they would be up to. Given that reasoning, Hermione had no choice but to concede the argument.

In a twisted sort of homage to the Marauders, Harry and Hermione, with the approval of the house elves, began to lay a variety of charms on all of the plates in the kitchen. Once the charms had been laid, the two Gryffindors tied a timer spell into them, so they would activate shortly after the start of breakfast the next morning. Next, Harry and Hermione set about to coat every goblet and soup bowl with a thin layer of a potion that they had swiped from the Weasley twins.

Qin, the house elf in charge of the kitchens, smiled as he watched as Harry and Hermione went about their acts of mischief. Running his fingers through his coarse beard, Qin thought, It's good to be seeing striplings having a bit of fun. Young Dobby had confessed he was worried how his young master and mistress were pushing themselves too hard. Keeping busy and working hard being good and all, but even house elves be taking breaks to unwind and not overwork ourselves. Taking a closer look at exactly what the two human children were doing, Qin chuckled to himself. Ooh, I be recognizing what these striplings be doing. I'd better be letting the cleaning crew for tomorrow know to expect big messes in Great Hall. Great Hall becoming a zoo again. Much like when Marauders were here years ago. Young Harry reminds Qin of young James. I wonder if they be related somehow.

- Leaky Cauldron -

Dari Àrmann was enjoying himself. After his last trip to Gringotts, he learned Dumbledore was in hot water with the Goblins due to mismanagement of financial funds and withholding critical

information from other wizards which prevented them from acknowledging their accounts and causing official documents from reaching their proper owners. Suffice to say, the Dumbledore vaults would be taking a major hit in a couple of months when the goblins took action to correct the errors which were caused by Dumbledore's actions. It couldn't have happened to a more deserving wizard, Dari Àrmann thought as he was eating his dinner in the main area of the inn. After finishing his dinner, Dari Àrmann left the Leaky Cauldron and headed out to Muggle London. From there he journeyed to the town of Brentwood, in Essex, England.

- FLASHBACK -

When he had spoken with Harry Potter and Hermione Granger (or Potter, due to their life bond), one of the things they had mentioned Albus Dumbledore had interfered with was their home life away from Hogwarts. While they didn't go into details about it, Dari Àrmann suspected that something was off about their homes. Deciding to check into it, Dari Àrmann had snuck into the Headmaster's office to look up both Harry's and Hermione's address. Albus, being the arrogant git that he was, had not even bothered to protect his office from someone using Muggle means of picking the lock. While he was searching for the student records, Dari Àrmann took the liberty of replacing Godric Gryffindor's sword with a fake. As he was leaving the office, Dari Àrmann noticed a collection of silver instruments. Intrigued, he moved to inspect the devices and discovered they were actually monitoring devices. When he invoked his Druidic Sight, Dari Àrmann was shocked to find that two of them were tied to both Harry and Hermione's magical signatures, and the third was tied to a location in southern England. After shattering the connections to Harry and Hermione by overloading the devices with raw magical energy, Dari Àrmann examined the third device and saw that it was connected to a location in Little Whinging, Surrey. As Harry's home address was located there, Dari Àrmann figured the location was the Dursley residence.

- END OF FLASHBACK -

As he flew around Brentwood, in the form of an owl, Dari Àrmann was quickly able to locate the Granger residence. Returning to his human form, Dari Àrmann quickly Disillusioned himself and snuck into the house. Upon hearing voices coming from a room off the kitchen, he made his way toward the source of the voices. Entering

the living room, Dari Àrmann saw two adults, whom he assumed were Hermione's guardians, listening to the radio and coincidentally talking about Hermione.

"Well it's only two more months and the hellspawn will be back for the summer," Emma Granger said with a disgusted huff. "I don't see why we have to have her tainting our home with her evil. If she insists on associating with those other heathens, why can't she stay with them?"

"Very true, my dear," Frank Granger replied. "There is no reason why good Christian people like ourselves should have to house and feed an abomination."

"I say we don't bother picking her up at the train station again, and inform the neighbors who ask that she has decided to stay the summer at her boarding school," Emma Granger suggested.

Thinking about it for a few moments, Frank nodded and said, "I like that idea, my dear. I will write her a letter informing her that she is no longer welcome here. If she insists on embracing that demonic filth, then she can stay there."

Resisting the urge to hex the two Muggles to within an inch of their lives, Dari Àrmann quickly left before he gave into the temptation. Heading south, Dari Àrmann was soon winging his way into Surrey County and heading for Little Whinging. As he landed just outside the property of Number 4 Privet drive, Dari Àrmann immediately started cursing Albus Dumbledore in every language that he knew - in the several millennia that he had lived, Dari Àrmann had learned several languages. As such, the cursing took several moments to die down.

Not only are these blood wards defective, probably due to the lack of affection between Harry and the Dursleys, they're being powered by Harry's magical core. Not even Vlad was that immoral, and he wrote the bloody definition of the words immoral and sadistic! Dari Àrmann thought angrily. Calming himself down, Dari Àrmann went to work on the task of slowly and carefully dismantling the wards, so not to risk a magical backlash injuring Harry. Once he had finished removing the last ward line from the property, Dari Àrmann entered the home. Locating the Dursley family eating in front of the television, it did not

take long for Dari Àrmann to form a similar opinion of the Dursleys, as he had of the Grangers.

"Mum, when does the freak come back?" Dudley whined. "I'm tired of having to do the chores."

"He'll be back in a couple of months, Dudikins," Petunia said.

"He couldn't get back here soon enough for me," Vernon said with a huff. "I have a whole list of things that need to be done around the house."

As Dari Àrmann listened to the Dursleys he soon came to the conclusion that young Harry was treated as a slave in this house, and given barely enough to survive. As with the Grangers, Dari Àrmann had to resist the urge to hex the Dursleys to within an inch of their miserable lives. Given what I've seen and heard, I doubt either Harry or Hermione will want to return to their "homes" if given another option.

- Hogwarts -

The following weeks went by without incident. Harry and Hermione continued with their training regime. As their wands no longer worked for them at this point, they had ceased using them during their training. They continued to hone their elemental abilities and their Animagus forms. Wary of the wards around and in the castle, they agreed that practicing any deeper into Necromancy or Blood Magic would have to wait until the summer, however, they continued to practice what skills they had learned, as these were the base skills the more advanced techniques built on.

Besides training, and keeping up with their daily studies, Harry and Hermione kept a watchful eye on Ron. They knew he had gone over to the side of the Deatheaters, but they weren't sure what all he had learned from them. They felt his arrogance and jealousy had given him the motivation to begin taking his studies seriously. As such, they didn't know of what he was capable of, especially since they had learned from Ginny and the twins he had been associating with the Slytherins lately. Things came to a head on June 16th when Hermione received a letter from her parents. Upon hearing her gasp upon reading the letter, Harry gently took the letter from her hand and read what it said.

Dear Hermione,

Emma and I have decided that since you have chosen to associate with other hellspawn then you can stay with them as you are no longer welcome in our home. As you have made the habit of bringing most of your clothes and all of your books to that school of yours, there is no reason for you to return to the house. As of now you are no longer a member of the Granger Family.

Frank Granger

Crumpling up the letter, Harry took Hermione by the hand and led her out of the Great Hall where they were eating lunch and to the Chamber of Secrets. Once there, they sat down on one of the couches they had smuggled down into the chamber, and Harry pulled Hermione into a deep hug and let her cry her eyes out. All Harry could do was to hold her and reassure Hermione that the Grangers were wrong about her. If they could not see what a wonderful, caring, and intelligent person she was, then they had no right to call her their daughter.

Harry went on to tell Hermione that she had a true family in him, and in a strange sort of way, Dobby. Having to chuckle at the part about Dobby, Hermione started to calm herself down, as she began to realize what Harry was telling her was true. If they have no desire to call me their daughter, then I have no problem letting them live their dull lives without me. Given what we have planned for the summer, this actually makes things easier for me.

After Hermione had calmed down, Harry replied, "That pretty much settles the matter for me, love. After this term is over, we'll meet with Dari Àrmann and take him up on his offer. As I have no intention of going back to the Dursleys, and as the Grangers have decided to disown you, there is nothing holding us back."

"You're right Harry," Hermione said nodding in agreement. "Thinking about it, I can't say I'm surprised at their decision. Things have been leading up to this for some time."

"From what you've told me about your home life, I can't argue with that," Harry stated. "I figure worst case scenario, if we decide

against Dari Àrmann's offer, we have several houses to choose from."

Laughing, Hermione stated that with the finances they had at their disposal and their ability of Allspeech, they could easily disappear into the Muggle world without a problem, although, she had a feeling that they would not have any problems accepting Dari Àrmann's offer.

- Professor Snape's Office -

Draco and Ron were sitting in Professor Snape's office waiting for the Potions Master to arrive. Neither one knew why they had been called there, but they surmised it had something to do with the Dark Lord as they were specifically told to make sure no one knew where they were.

A few minutes later, Severus Snape entered his office and was pleased to see both Draco and Ronald waiting patiently for him. Taking a seat behind his desk, Snape began, "I am glad to see you were both prompt in coming here. What I am about to tell you is for your ears only. Sirius Black has informed me that almost all the preparations for the return of the Dark Lord are in place, with only one piece of the puzzle missing. As such, I have been tasked with keying the Tri-Wizard trophy to a Portkey sending its bearer to a place that has been set up for the ritual which will return our Dark Lord to his former glory and power. As I was able to trick the Goblet of Fire into selecting Potter's name as the fourth champion without being caught, it was decided I had the best chance with the Portkey part of the plan. What I am tasking the two of you with, is to make sure Potter is the one to reach the trophy first, by any means necessary save the death of the other champions. Any fatalities would bring unwanted attention to bear."

After both Draco and Ron thanked the Potions Master for this honor, Snape asked how their independent studies were coming.

"My studies into alchemy are progressing well, I believe," Draco stated. "I'm nowhere near the level of the headmaster or Nicholas Flamel, but I am making headway in my learning."

Nodding in response, Snape motioned for Ron to go. "I am pleased to report that I have managed to successfully decipher the notes in

my great uncle's journal and have successfully brewed the Magus Clausus Elixir. I have tested it on several unsuspecting students in all four houses of varying blood purities. While most of the Purebloods that were tested regained normal use of their magic within a day or two, the Muggleborns and the weaker Half-Bloods were affected for around a week's time. Given that each person was only given a minor dose of the potion, a small increase in dosage should lengthen the time the person is affected, although further testing would be needed to verify that."

"Excellent work the both of you," Snape replied. "While Draco is more than likely assured a place in the Death Eater ranks, when the Dark Lord hears of your work and dedication Ronald, I am certain that a Weasley will once more take a place amongst the true believers. However, by fulfilling the task I have given you both undetected, it will help your chances of pleasing our Dark Lord." With that, Snape excused the two from his office, as he had papers to grade.

On the morning of June 24, the castle was buzzing with excitement over the fact the third and final task of the Tri-Wizard tournament would be taking place today after supper. Harry was chatting with Neville about their Herbology assignment when the morning post owls came flying in. A gray Great Horned owl flew toward Harry and Hermione and dropped a rolled piece of parchment in between them before flying off. Unrolling the parchment, they saw that it was a letter written in Ogham runes.

Harry and Hermione,

First off nice work on the runic seals. Yes, I was observing the ritual that the two of you performed. I must say that for two people with no formal training in the Druidic Arts, you both did exceptionally well. Seeing the work you put into the ritual, and how you honored the gods of old, I am more certain than ever the both of you would do well under my teaching. But more on that at the end of term. This letter is to warn you that something is stirring in the ether and it seems centered around Hogwarts. With the final part of the tournament happening today, do not let your guard down and be mindful of your surroundings. Something monumental is going to be occurring today, for good or ill I can not tell. As stated when we last met, I will meet up with you at the Leaky Cauldron on the Monday following your return to London.

Dari Àrmann

When Neville asked what the letter was, Harry stated the letter was from the Daily Prophet requesting an interview with Hermione and him about them being together. After they finished eating, Harry, Hermione, and Neville head off to Transfiguration while Ginny headed off to Charms. As Fred and George had a free period after breakfast, they headed back to Gryffindor Tower to work on some pranks they were developing.

At the start of Transfiguration, Harry and Hermione handed Professor McGonagall their 'current' progress report on where they were at in the Animagus Transformation. While they trusted their head of house, they didn't trust the headmaster not to try and get information out of Professor McGonagall, and as such, they reported that they had completed their research on the Animagus Transformation itself, and were making headway on analyzing their dreams. During class, Ron asked, "Professor, why don't Potter and Granger have to do the assignment? Aren't they powerful enough to do the charm?"

"Probably not," Draco commented with his usual sneer. "Everyone knows that advanced magic like this is beyond the abilities of non-Purebloods. Given who his father was, Potter might be able to pull it off, but a Muggleborn like Granger would be better off leaving this kind of magic to her betters."

Seeing that both Harry and Hermione were close to doing something to Ronald and Draco, Professor McGonagall decided to intervene and prove a point at the same time. "Interesting theory Mr. Malfoy; why don't we put it to the test? Would the four of you please come to the front of the class?"

While Harry and Hermione immediately made their way to the front of the class, Draco and Ron were slower to respond, as they realized that their taunting had been called.

"Now class," Professor McGonagall stated as she directed Harry and Hermione to move to her right, while directing Draco and Ron to her left, "we are now going to have a practical demonstration on the benefits of paying attention in my class and truly understanding the concepts discussed. Plus the benefits of studying ahead." She then

went on to explain that while Harry would attempt to transfigure Draco into an animal, Hermione would attempt the same with Ron.

"Professor," Draco stated, "it's against the rules for a student to turn another student into something else."

Mione, isn't it your line to point out an attempt to break the rules? Harry sent over their bond.

Prat, Hermione replied, although she had a smile on her face.

"Under normal circumstances, Mr. Malfoy, you would be correct," Professor McGonagall explained. "However, in the case of class demonstrations it is allowed. Much like when Professor Snape uses a student to show the effects of certain potions. As long as the effect is reversible with no ill effects on the student, such actions are allowed. No let us begin, Hermione you may go first."

Smiling sweetly at Ron, Hermione pointed her wand at Ron and said, "Vir ut sus." With this Ron was turned into a pig.

"How ironically appropriate," Lavender Brown said with a laugh. This of course caused the class to laugh. Also, as Lavender was one of the biggest gossips in their year, both Draco's and Ron's demonstration would be known by everyone before dinner time. After Ron was returned to his proper form, it was Harry's turn.

Giving Draco an evil grin, Harry pointed his wand at Draco and said, "Vir ut lepus." At this, Draco turned into a white rabbit. Looking at the rabbit for a moment, Harry flicked his wand and muttered a few words. The white rabbit was suddenly dressed in a waistcoat with a pocket watch tucked in the front pocket. This caused all of the Muggleborns and several Half-Bloods to burst out laughing. Puzzled, Professor McGonagall looked at Harry for an explanation. "It's from the book Alice's Adventures In Wonderland by Lewis Carroll, a Muggle author," Harry explained. After returning Draco to his normal form, Professor McGonagall had the four of them return to their seats. Suffice to say, nobody complained about Harry and Hermione being allowed to work on something other than the class assignment.

While the rest of the class continued working on the cross-species transfiguration, Harry asked Hermione what her opinion of the letter they had received from Dari Àrmann.

I'm thinking if anything was going to happen, it would be while you're in the maze,Hermione responded over their bond.

I agree, love. It would be the opportune time for Voldemort's followers to try something, Harry stated. I'm glad we were successful in our Animagus transformations as the enhanced senses I have from the Twilight Panther will definitely help in the maze. That and if things get too out of control, I can Shadow Walk to safety.

As they both decided there wasn't anything else they could do, other than what they'd been doing, they continued with their Animagus 'research'.

- Headmaster's Office -

Albus Dumbledore was feeling better than he had in a while. He had just received a letter from Gringotts stating they would like to meet with him in regards to his request about the Potter account. It's about time those blasted goblins came to their senses. With access to the Potter Vaults, I'll be able to ensure that the knowledge and wealth they contain will go toward the furthering of my goals. This couldn't have happened at a better time, as all the signs are pointing toward something monumental occurring soon. I suspect it will be Tom's return to power, although how he plans to accomplish that is still a mystery. Severus has assured me that he has not heard anything from his former associates and while the Dark Mark has darkened somewhat, it is still fairly faded. Severus' redemption has been a blessing for the cause – I will always be grateful I resisted the urge to curse the man as he was a loose end. By tomorrow morning this tournament will be over and things can return to normal around here.

Popping a lemon drop into his mouth, Albus Dumbledore leaned back in his chair and reflected on the events scheduled for the summer. With the Dursleys keeping the boy isolated and abused, I'll be able to more easily mold the boy into the proverbial sacrificial lamb I need. Once Tom regains power, I'll be able to play on the boy's habit of rushing into things to save his friends. After the boy has been killed, Tom will think the 'prophecy' has been fulfilled and he has destroyed the one person who could defeat him. Afterward, it will only be a matter of time before I confront him, and once again take my rightful place as the Beacon of Light. With that still fresh in

the people's minds, I think I'll actually run for the Minister of Magic position this time. It's about time I retire from Hogwarts, and take up a new position of power. I'll of course recommend Minerva for the position as she is already doing most of the work already. As he sucked on the lemon drop, he thought contently that everything was going according to plan.

- Quidditch Pitch -

That evening, after dinner, the champions gathered at the front of the maze, while the spectators gathered in the stands to watch. Armed with Invisibility Cloaks, backup wands and the layout of the maze, Ron and Draco had snuck into the maze earlier and positioned themselves where they could make sure that Potter was the first to reach the trophy. As Snape had assured them that the trophy was now a Portkey timed to activate after the final task had started, thus assuring it could be placed in the center of the maze with out a problem, Draco and Ron were confident this mission would secure them a place in the Dark Lord's service.

Once everyone had gathered, Ludo Bagman stepped onto the stage erected in front of the maze and told Harry and Victor to position themselves on opposite sides of the maze and to fire off sparks when they were ready. After wishing the other champions good luck, Harry moved into position and fired off red sparks from his wand, ironically the only thing his wand was good for anymore.

With a magically enhanced voice, Ludo Bagman counted down the time and then fired off a Blasting Hex into the air to signal the start of the final task.

Upon hearing the starting blast from Mr Bagman, Harry entered the maze, his wand out and ready. Taking out the map he had made earlier, Harry activated it and quickly memorized a possible route to the center. Putting the map away, Harry headed off. As he went, Harry paid attention to what was around him, as he was aware that literally anything could be hiding in wait. A few minutes later, his sense of smell picked up a faint smell of stagnant water. As he looked ahead of him, he noticed that the ground seemed a touch too even. Conjuring a rock, Harry threw it at the ground ahead of him and sure enough it sank right into the ground.

Quicksand from the looks of it. After casting a quick Solidification Charm on the ground, Harry hurried across. Shortly after this he heard the blast signifying that Cedric and Fleur were entering the maze. Suddenly sensing danger, Harry rolled to the ground as darts flew at him from a large plant which looked like a Venus Fly Trap. Throwing a cutting hex toward the giant plant, Harry continued on.

Suddenly, he felt a familiar cold feeling fill his body. Looking up he saw the robed form of a Dementor gliding toward him. Not even Fudge is that stupid, as the other schools would threaten action which would hurt his political standing. That only leaves one option. Pointing his wand at the 'Dementor', knowing full well that the spectators were watching, Harry shouted, "Riddikulus!" The Dementor quickly turned into a white rabbit with waistcoat and hopped quickly away. That should get a few laughs from the audience. Especially if they've heard about Transfiguration class.

Quickly, Harry took a right at the next fork in the path, and continued on. Harry stopped suddenly, as his hearing picked up something moving around up ahead. Taking it slowly, Harry peeked around the corner and was glad he had been paying attention, as in front of him was a Blast-Ended Skrewt. Probably from Hagrid's class. I was wondering what had happened to them when Hagrid stopped using them, due to their size and temper. Figures the Ministry would use them for the maze. Knowing from Hagrid's class, the Blast-Ended Skrewt relied more on its sense of smell than its sight, Harry cast a Scent Masking Charm on himself and slowly moved forward.

Making sure he stayed close to the hedge wall, Harry moved closer to the creature before levitating it out of the way, all the while making sure that the end that shot out fire was pointed away from him. Once past the Blast-Ended Skrewt, Harry made his way deeper into the maze.

As Harry continued to make his way through the maze, he would periodically take out his map and verify his location. During one such stop, Harry was attacked by a mountain troll. Bloody hell, a blasted mountain troll. I take back what I thought earlier about Fudge. He is that stupid. Throwing a Blinding Hex at the troll to temporarily blind it, Harry quickly dodged out of the way of the large club it was swinging.

Following the path laid out on his map, Harry headed off down a right fork in the path. He soon came upon a fog which surrounded

him cutting off his field of vision. Extending his hand in front of him, Harry quickly cast a few passive diagnostic charms. He breathed a sigh of relief when he discovered the fog was simply that; a thick fog. Harry cast a powerful warming charm around the area, and was soon rewarded with the sight of the fog beginning to dissipate. I'll have to thank Professor Sprout for the lesson on basic weather knowledge, Harry thought as the fog had thinned enough so he could once again see the path.

- Elsewhere in the Maze -

Ron was currently shadowing Fleur, while Draco was following Victor. Ron found he enjoyed stalking the half-breed witch. Draco said Walden MacNair was one of the best hunters of magical beasts and half-breed mongrels. He was also one of the rare Gryffindors to side with the Dark Lord in the first war. I'll have to talk with him when I get the chance. Seeing his chance, as Fleur was dealing with a swarm of Doxies, Ron sent off a Bludgeoning Hex at the Beauxbatons Champion. As Fleur was busy dealing with the Doxies, she did not see the hex until it was too late. Thrown up against the far wall of the maze, Fleur winced as she struggled to stand. Realizing whatever had hit her had broken a couple of ribs, she decided it was better to concede defeat, than end up getting hurt worse further into the maze. Firing off sparks from her wand, she signaled to the judges she was removing herself from the final task.

While Ron was busy with Fleur, Draco was shadowing Victor Krum. Draco had been following the Durmstrang Champion for several minutes and had yet to see an opening where he could slow the wizard down. Fortunately, an opportunity presented itself when Krum was confronted by a sphinx. Seizing his chance, Draco sent a Confundus Charm at Victor just as the Sphinx had finished with her riddle. Under the effects of the charm, Victor was unable to answer the riddle correctly and was now faced with fighting a fully grown and irritated sphinx. After receiving a near fatal wound, the Durmstrang Champion sent off sparks signaling his withdrawal from the final task.

Meanwhile, Harry had managed to avoid a giant acromantula and was making his way deeper into the maze when he heard the magically enhanced voice of Ludo Bagman call out that Fleur Delacour had sent up sparks signaling her request for aid, thus removing her from the tournament. Hope she's okay, Harry thought

as he continued making his way through the maze. Feeling the hairs on the back of his neck start to prickle, Harry hit the ground as a Stunning Curse flew through the air where he had been only moments before. Tracking the spell back to its point of origin, Harry saw a dark robed figure heading toward him. Sending off several stunners and Incarcerous hexes, Harry quickly got to his feet. I so don't have time for this, Harry thought as he closed his eyes and cast a Solaris Charm centered between the robed figure and himself. The burst of light not only produced a blinding light in the general vicinity, Harry used the shadows created to appear behind his attacker. Once there, Harry hit the robed figure with a Stupefying Curse.

Continuing to move deeper into the maze, Harry followed the path he was on as, baring any blockages, it should lead straight to the center of the maze. As he continued, Harry heard Ludo Bagman announce that Victor Krum had sent up sparks requesting assistance. Looks like it's down to Cedric and me.

Harry soon entered the center area of the maze. On a silver pedestal sat the Tri-Wizard trophy. Knowing it was far from over, Harry cautiously approached the trophy. Extending his senses outward, he searched the area for magical signatures of any kind. The only thing that registered was the trophy itself; as a Portkey. Why would the trophy be a Portkey? As the judges can see into the maze, they would know when one of us reached the trophy and end the task. Something definitely smells rotten in Denmark. Sending out a message to Hermione through their bond, Harry let her know what the situation was. I've got a bad feeling about this, but I also think I should play it out and see what's going on. At least this way, we may have a better shot at finding out who set this up.

As much as Hermione did not like the situation, she had to agree with Harry. He was not walking into it blindly, and they could use all the information they could get right now. Be careful, love, or you'll have to deal with one seriously pissed off witch.

With a mischievous tone, Harry sent back, Yes dear, and touched the Tri-Wizard trophy. Harry immediately felt the familiar tugging sensation on his navel and vanished from the maze.

- Quidditch Stands -

Harry's disappearance from the maze caused a commotion in the stands in the judges' area, as it had been announced that when a champion reached the trophy and touched it, golden sparks would fly from it signaling the end of the task. The judges immediately called for the maze to be dropped so the area could be searched for magical traces to determine what had happened.

Albus Dumbledore was not in a good mood. Not only did he not have any clue as to what had happened to Harry, but his jaw was in serious need of Madam Pomfrey's attention as his deputy headmistress had rounded on him for his carelessness in handling things. Minerva McGonagall then proceeded to backhand him so hard he was forced backwards several steps, before stating she was holding him personally responsible for lousing things up. She then stormed off, although a steady stream of invectives continued to reach Albus' ears from the retreating woman.

Note for future reference, Albus thought as he headed toward Poppy. Do everything possible to avoid angering Minerva McGonagall at all cost. She could put Molly Weasley to shame, when it comes to defending those in her charge.

- Little Hangleton Cemetery -

Harry dropped to the ground, thinking how much he disliked Portkey travel. He was suddenly blown backwards against a tombstone and bound to it by magical ropes. As he twisted his head, Harry read the name, Thomas Riddle Sr., carved into the tombstone. Oh hell, Voldemort's father, this can't be good, Harry thought as he saw a black robed figure approach him.

As the figure drew closer, they pulled back their hood and Harry saw the face of Sirius Black. "Hello godson, it's been a while since we last spoke," Sirius stated as he took Harry's wand from him.

"Not long enough, you bloody traitor," Harry said with a growl.

"Quickly, Black," hissed a voice from a nearby large, bubbling cauldron.

"All is ready my lord," Sirius replied as he picked up a small bone from the ground. Quickly dropping the bone into the cauldron with a

splash, Sirius chanted, "Bone of the father, unknowingly given, you will renew your son!"

As Harry watched, he saw Sirius take a dagger from his robes and pulled back the sleeve of his robe. He wouldn't! thought Harry. But sure enough, Sirius sliced off a good portion of flesh from his forearm and chanted, "Flesh of the servant willingly given you will revive your master," as the chunk of flesh dropped into the cauldron. After performing a quick healing charm on the wound, thankful for his enhanced pain tolerance, Sirius went over to Harry and sliced open his sleeve. Sirius then proceeded to stab Harry in the arm, allowing the blood to drip into a vial he held under the wound.

"Blood of the enemy, forcibly taken, will resurrect your foe," Sirius chanted.

"Help yourself traitor; you're more than welcome to my blood," Harry whispered quietly.

Not hearing Harry's comment, Sirius dumped the blood into the cauldron. Levitating nine glass globes from his robes, Sirius sent them into the bubbling cauldron. Raising both arms high in the air, Sirius called out, "By the the souls of the innocent thrice fated, wipe away the stain of corruption."

Blackish green smoke rose from the cauldron, before it pulsed with a pale yellow light. A couple of moments later, a cold high voice filled the graveyard.

"Robe me, Sirius Orion Black," hissed Voldemort. As Sirius moved quickly to obey his master's request, Harry was grateful the smoke was thick enough to block his view of the Dark Lord's newly constituted body. He then knelt down and raised up Voldemort's wand. "Your wand master," Sirius said.

Taking his wand, Voldemort place his hand on Sirius's shoulder. "Arise my loyal servant, you have served me well."

"I live to serve you, my lord," Sirius stated as he stood up.

Nodding with approval, Voldemort turned toward Harry and said, "Harry, we meet once again."

Seeing Voldemort clearly for the first time, Harry saw that Voldemort had regained his human body, and it appeared free of any of the disfiguring features of overusing the true black magic Voldemort was known for.

"Go back to hell, Riddle," Harry spat. The soul energy from those globes must have been what Sirius used to cleanse Riddle's spirit of corruption. I remember reading that the right mixture of soul energy could be used for that purpose. The downside was it corrupted the soul of the person leading the cleansing ritual. Given the nature of the ritual Sirius just performed, I doubt he'd notice the added corruption.

"Foolish boy; you're tied to the gravestone of my late father – a filthy Muggle without a drop of magic in him. But he served a noble purpose by providing me with the means to return to my true form," Voldemort said with a evil hiss. Seizing Sirius Black's left arm, Voldemort pressed his wand to the now fully restored Dark Mark. "My followers have all felt the call. Many will return to me crawling on their hands and knees, but I foresee others will attempt to ignore my summons and hide themselves away. Those who run will be dealt with as they deserve."

Voldemort turned his back to Harry in response to several pops of people Apparating in, which could be heard throughout the graveyard. Soon several dozen black robed figures wearing white skull masks approached the spot where Voldemort and Sirius stood. As this was happening, Harry used his magic to loosen the ropes binding him to the tombstone. As the black robed figures came closer they all stared at Voldemort for a moment before dropping to their knees in submission. Voldemort gazed upon his followers with a neutral expression on his face.

"Yes my loyal followers, I have returned, and once again we stand together beneath the Dark Mark," Voldemort stated. Allowing his followers a moment of relief, then Voldemort's calm face turned to one of anger. "I am not pleased with the state of things on my return. I sense a veil of guilt and deception from many of you. You among my followers, who denounced me to avoid Azkaban, quickly returning to your old pathetic lives devoid of true power. Save for Sirius Black, who braved Azkaban before escaping that fortress of sorrow, none of you searched for any sign I remained. None of you followed any avenue to verify whether I was truly gone. For thirteen

long years I was trapped between worlds, virtually powerless and weak." Stopping his angry rant, Voldemort looked out amongst his followers.

"Only Sirius and those still trapped in Azkaban have remained true to their oaths of loyalty to me. Only they had the determination and faith in our cause to continue to fight. The rest of you will have to work long and hard to regain your previous stations of power. Those of you who have retained high positions of authority in the Ministry will be called on to use your influences to work my will. But first, CRUCIO MAXIMUS!"

A wave of sickly red energy erupted from Voldemort's wand and rushed into the Death Eaters causing them to scream in pain. As Voldemort was torturing his followers Harry managed to escape his bonds, then quickly and quietly grabbed the Tri-Wizard trophy and made his way around the group of dark wizards until he was behind them facing Voldemort. Hiding amongst a group of fallen trees, Harry called for his staff and waited.

Voldemort, releasing his followers from his curse, stated, "Now we turn to the guest of honor at tonight's festivities. Young Harry Potter, the boy everyone hails as my destroyer," Voldemort announced with an evil grin.

Turning to show his followers the Wizarding World's precious Boy-Who-Lived bound to a tombstone, Voldemort was greeted with the sight of his father's tombstone and the ropes hanging loosely around it. Potter was nowhere to be seen. In a fit of rage, Voldemort blasted the tombstone to dust. Turning to his followers, Voldemort yelled for them to spread out and find the boy. That would be my cue to leave, but first a parting gift, Harry thought as he began to quietly chant, pouring magic into his staff. As he finished the incantation Harry slammed his staff to the ground, sending a wave of magical energy throughout the graveyard. Confident the summoning had worked, Harry sent his staff back to its resting place. Harry then Disillusioned himself and stepped into a nearby shadow.

While Voldemort was searching the grounds for the boy, he felt a wave of magical energy surge through the area. What in the... he began to think before the ground began to shake. Cracks appeared in the ground as various skeletons and rotting corpses pulled themselves out of the ground and began to make their way toward

the nearest living soul. While they did not attack the Death Eaters or Voldemort, and returned to their graves upon being struck by either a spell or physically, their sudden appearance unnerved the Voldemort's followers. Voldemort, on the other hand, was intrigued. Well played Harry - I must say I am impressed. Calling up the dead, at such a young age, is definitely a feat worth noting. I might have been a tad hasty in planning your death. You definitely didn't learn this trick from the old fool. There may be hope for you yet.

- Hogwarts: Quidditch Pitch -

Harry, assuming he would appear in front of people, made a show of appearing out of nowhere, stumbling to the ground still clutching the Tri-Wizard Trophy. Throwing up a shield of fake memories, Harry mumbled something unintelligible and, after letting Hermione know what he was doing via their bond, stunned himself to mimic passing out.

Suffice to say, Harry's reappearance caused almost as much panic as his disappearance. Madam Pomfrey, plowing through the crowd, soon reached Harry. She was joined shortly by Hermione, who quickly cast a charm to mask Harry's true maximum power levels. Nodding to herself, Madam Pomfrey conjured a stretcher and, after getting Harry on it, brought him to the hospital wing. Following Madam Pomfrey, Hermione asked if Harry was going to be okay.

"He'll be fine Hermione," Madam Pomfrey replied kindly. "He's mainly just bruised to hell and back, with a few cracked ribs. His magical reserves are fairly low, but that along with his injuries will be fine by tomorrow morning. This is assuming I can get him to stay in bed long enough for his body to heal."

"Harry never has liked hospitals," Hermione said with a chuckle. Not that those bloody relatives ever bothered to take him to a doctor. Given how they treated him, it'd probably raise too many questions.

While Madam Pomfrey went to get a couple of potions for Harry, Hermione cast an Enervate Charm on Harry to counteract the Stunning Curse he had used on himself. "Hey Mione," Harry replied weakly as he opened his eyes. "What'd I miss?"

You owe me one hell of an explanation, love, Hermione sent over their bond. Out loud she stated, "Not much, just the usual pandemonium around here."

"Good you're awake, Harry, that makes getting you to drink these potions much easier," Madam Pomfrey stated as she came up to them holding a tray with two potions on it.

"Oh joy, a Restorative Draught and a Pain Reducer," Harry grumbled as Madam Pomfrey handed him the vials.

"Mind your tone young man," Poppy Pomfrey scolded. "You are as bad as your father was. He was in here as often as you've been, although most of his trips here came from trying crazy stunts on his broom."

"Someday, you'll have to tell me some of those stories," Harry stated as he downed the potions.

Seeing her charge was in good hands, Poppy left Harry and Hermione alone and returned to her office. As soon as they were alone, Harry set up a warning charm, to alert them if anyone was coming near, while Hermione set up a privacy ward. Once this was done, Harry began to tell Hermione everything that had happened since he landed in the graveyard.

"So not only is Voldemort back, but he has regained his former strength and power," Hermione stated after listening to Harry's story.

"That about sums it up, love," Harry replied. "Although, the ritual Sirius Black used called for my blood to be forcibly taken. As I stated that he was welcome to it, my guess is that this altered the ritual slightly. Whether it had any detrimental effects on Riddle or not, I haven't a clue."

"We can only hope," Hermione replied. "What are you going to tell Dumbledore? You know the manipulative bastard is going to ask."

"Language, love," Harry teased as he agreed with her description of Dumbledore. "I figured I would fake amnesia about the incident, and let him look at my 'memories' of it. I've got a feeling most people are not going to believe Voldemort has returned. Not to mention Riddle

is smart enough to realize revealing himself now would cost him in the end. Better to act from the shadows until the time is right."

"You've got a point, Harry," Hermione said in agreement. "With Cornelius Fudge and probably several other Ministry officials either Death Eaters themselves, or having Death Eater sympathies, the Ministry of Magic would probably accuse anyone talking about Voldemort's return of inciting a riot."

"Dumbledore will of course ignore this obvious fact, and will try to garner support for dealing with the issue," Harry stated.

At this point the warning charm went off, and Harry and Hermione quickly dismantled both wards and began talking about the task itself and what Harry had faced in the maze.

"Harry, my boy, I'm glad to see you awake," Albus Dumbledore stated as he walked up. "I was hoping you would be able to tell me what happened to you after you vanished from the maze."

"I'm sorry sir," Harry said feigning confusion, "but I don't seem to remember anything from the time I touched the Tri-Wizard trophy until I woke up in the hospital wing."

"That's quite alright Harry," Dumbledore assured him, "if you simply lie back and relax, I might be able to uncover what happened."

"Sure, if you think it might be important," Harry replied as he lay back onto the hospital bed. As he did so, Harry brought forth a set of fake memories of what had occurred, situating them in such a way to seem as his mind was blocking the incident from Harry's conscious thought.

Albus Dumbledore looked into the boy's eyes and cast the Legilimency Charm. Delving into Harry's mind, Albus saw the boy touch the Tri-Wizard trophy and ending up in a graveyard. He witnessed Sirius Black stunning the boy and tying him to a tombstone. After dropping a bone into a bubbling cauldron, Albus saw Sirius stab Harry in the arm and take some of the boy's blood. Albus then watched as Voldemort emerged from the cauldron reborn into a new body. Voldemort then summoned his followers and after dueling with Harry, managed to hit the boy in the head with some unknown curse, before Harry managed to escape.

Albus Dumbledore left Potter's mind with a sigh. So Riddle has managed to find a way to return using forbidden magic. Not only that, but seems to have blocked his return from Potter's conscious mind. Hopefully the effects will wear off soon, as I need the boy believing that Voldemort has truly returned. I'd better send out the word to the others. We'll have to meet soon and figure out where to go from here. Giving the two young Gryffindors a grandfatherly smile, Albus informed them Harry had been taken by Death Eaters and had done something he was unable to see. He went on to advise them not to worry about it, as there seemed to be no ill effects, other than the memory loss, to Harry. No good in worrying the boy, until it becomes necessary, Albus thought as he took his leave of Harry and Hermione.

A few minutes later, Madam Pomfrey came in and informed Hermione she would need to leave, as Harry needed his rest to recover. Giving Harry a quick kiss, Hermione headed to the Chamber of Secrets to start packing up the potions they had been storing there. After she had finished with the potions, Hermione headed to the Gryffindor Common Room.

"Hey Hermione," Ginny called out when Hermione stepped through the portrait hole. "How's Harry doing? Madam Pomfrey wouldn't let any of us in to see him."

"Other than being bruised and battered, he's fine," Hermione replied as she flopped down on a couch. "Madam Pomfrey told me he should be able to leave tomorrow morning."

"Unless he sneaks out of the hospital wing earlier," Fred pointed out.

"This is Harry we're talking about," George added.

The others nodded in agreement - Harry never stayed in the hospital wing any longer than he absolutely had to. More than once, Madam Pomfrey had threatened to stick him to the bed via a Sticking Charm, to ensure he stayed put.

As they talked, Fred assured Hermione that Rita Skeeter wouldn't be writing any of her trash articles for some time. When Hermione asked why, George pulled out a sealed glass jar with a beetle trapped inside.

"Say hello to Rita Skeeter," Ginny stated dramatically. "Among her other annoying skills, Ms. Skeeter is also an unregistered beetle Animagus."

Hearing this, Hermione got an evil looking grin on her face. "Do any of you currently have a deal with Rita?"

Seeing that none of them did, Hermione stood up, as she took out her wand. After mumbling something under her breath and waving her wand in a random fashion, an orange bolt of magical energy appeared to come out of Hermione's wand. After passing through the glass jar, the bolt struck the trapped beetle and vanished. Nodding with satisfaction, Hermione put her wand away and sat back down on the couch.

"What did you just do?" Ginny asked.

"Nothing much, Ginny," Hermione replied with a smile. "I simply locked Rita into her current form for a while."

Wide eyed, George and Fred asked in unison, "For how long?"

"Until I cancel the charm," Hermione replied. "Hey Ginny, can I borrow your latest Teen Witch? My stuff is already packed."

"Sure, let me go get it," Ginny replied. She had gone two steps, before she turned and glaring at Hermione stated, "Nice try Hermione. Where did you learn how lock an Animagus in their animal form?"

"Harry and I stumbled onto it when we were researching Animagus for a Transfiguration paper," Hermione explained. "I did want to borrow the magazine though."

Laughing at the change which had occurred in Hermione this year, Ginny went and got the magazine for her. I'm glad to see Hermione learning to relax a bit. Getting together with Harry was the best thing to happen to either one of them, Ginny thought as she sat back down in the Gryffindor Common Room with a magazine for herself.

After relaxing for a while, the Gryffindors headed off to their dorms for the night as they all had class the next day.

- Slytherin Common Room -

While the Gryffindors were chatting away in their common room, several Slytherins were celebrating Voldemort's return. Ron, being one of them in everything but name, had been invited to the celebration and was currently enjoying Daphne Greengrass' company.

"With the Dark Lord's return," Draco was saying, "things will finally change for the better. My father has assured me those of us who have shown our loyalty to the cause will be rewarded." Turning to Ron, he stated, "He also wanted to me to let you know Ron, that the Dark Lord was very pleased to hear a Weasley has not only seen the light once again, but has returned to the fold bearing a worthy offering. My father also told me to let you know he'd contact you in regards to the official initiation into the Death Eaters."

Pleased to hear that he would be joining his friends in the cause, Ron thought this was going to be a great summer. Daphne showed her excitement over Ron's acceptance by grabbing the back of his head and kissing him full on the lips until his toes curled. Later in the evening, the two of them announced they were officially a couple.

- Great Hall -

The following morning, during breakfast, Ludo Bagman stood up and called for everyone's attention. "With the third and final task over, the judges have tallied the final points. In fourth place, with a total of 75 points, is Fleur Delacour of Beauxbatons. In third place, with a total of 120 points, is Victor Krum of Durmstrang. In second place, with a total of 125 points, is Cedric Diggory of Hogwarts. And finally in first place and the Tri-Wizard champion with a total of 170 points, is Harry Potter of Hogwarts."

With each named called the students and staff applauded. When Harry's name was called as the Tri-Wizard champion, the students of Hogwarts screamed in applause as not only did a Hogwarts student win the tournament, but a Hogwarts student took second place as well.

As Harry had been released from the hospital wing earlier that morning, Ludo Bagman called him forward to receive both the prize

money and the Tri-Wizard trophy. After presenting the trophy to Dumbledore to be displayed in the trophy case, Harry returned to his seat after stating he wasn't going to hold up breakfast by giving a speech. This of course earned him a round of applause from students of all three schools.

The remainder of the day and the upcoming weekend consisted of reviewing and studying for the final exams which would take place all next week. The following Thursday, after Harry and Hermione finished taking their DADA exam, they went to visit Hagrid. Noticing that Hagrid had packed up most of his belongings, the two Gryffindors asked where he was going.

"Don't you go worrying about me, you two. Dumbledore has asked me to go on a mission for him, is all. I figure to be gone most if not all of the summer and the next school year. If all goes well, I should be back for your sixth year. It's not anything dangerous or anything, he just wants me to go look for some people."

After wishing their half-giant friend good luck, Harry and Hermione chatted with Hagrid about the how their year had gone. Knowing Hagrid trusted Dumbledore implicitly, they gave a very watered down and edited version. After chatting for a while, they said their goodbyes and headed back to the castle.

The next day, after finishing their last exam, Harry and Hermione relaxed in the Chamber of Secrets and finished clearing out the chamber of tomes and manuscripts which they had found there. On the chance they did not return to Hogwarts next year, they had decided to clear out all of things they had discovered in the Chamber of Secrets.

At the Closing Feast, Dumbledore thanked the student body for conducting themselves well while they hosted the students of Beauxbatons and Durmstrang.

"So what are you guys planning to do during the summer break?" Hermione asked the Weasleys and Neville as they were eating dinner..

"Fred and I will be causing our usual mayhem and destruction," George replied.

"Our dear brother Ronald has 'volunteered' to be the test subject for some new pranks we've been developing that are in need of some serious testing," Fred added.

Rolling her eyes at her brothers' antics, Ginny replied, "Staying out these two idiots' way, and working on Potions. I've got a project in mind, but I want to run its plausibility by Neville's Uncle Gregory. He's a Potions Master who works as an independent consultant. Neville introduced me to him during Christmas break, and he was glad to see someone interested in Potions despite Professor Snape's attitude. He would be glad to tutor us in Potions this summer, but his current schedule won't allow for the needed time to do it properly. Neville's grandmother, however, stated she has hired a Potions Master from Tibet to make sure our Potions skills are where they should be."

"The fact she'll be marrying into the Longbottom Family was also a plus in my uncle's opinion. It wouldn't surprise me if he tried roping Ginny into becoming his apprentice when she's turns seventeen," Neville said chuckling. "As for me, besides studying Potions, I'll be working on a research project for Professor Sprout over the summer. I'm looking into the feasibility of cross-breeding magical plants with each other."

"So what are you two lovebirds planning to do over the summer?" George asked.

"Unfortunately not spending it together," Hermione replied with an annoyed look. "My folks are taking a trip over to France for some convention, and are taking me along."

"I'll spending my summer like always," Harry said with a sigh. "Staying out of my relatives' way, and resisting the urge to hex them." Glancing up at the staff table, Harry noticed Snape had reappeared. He'd been missing since the day of the final task of the Tri-Wizard tournament. Probably getting orders from Riddle, now that he's back, Harry thought to himself.

As the six of them continued chatting, Ron, who was sitting at the other end of the table, was glaring at them. Those gits will soon get what's coming to them. With the Dark Lord's return, things will finally be made right for those of us who superior to the rest of the magical rabble.

The following morning, the students went down to Hogsmeade to board the Hogwarts Express for the return trip to London. It was during the trip back to London, that Harry pulled Fred and George aside to talk with them.

"I have a proposition for the two of you, if you're interested in getting your joke shop started," Harry explained.

"You have our undivided attention," the twins said in unison.

"I would like to invest the thousand galleons I won into your joke shop," Harry said as he set the bag of galleons down in front of them. "My only condition is you make the lives of the students at Hogwarts, who have joined the Pureblood Supremacy Movement, a veritable hell on Earth."

After several minutes of not being able to speak, both Fred and George stated Harry was crazy to give the two of them that much gold, even if it was for their joke shop. Harry told them he viewed it as a good investment and he had a feeling the time was coming when terrorizing Death Eater wannabes would help lighten the mood at the school.

Realizing they were not going to win this argument, Fred and George agreed to Harry's terms. They insisted, however, Harry would own ten percent of the shop. Harry stated as long as he was only a silent partner and his share of the profits were put back into the shop for the first ten years, then he was fine with that. After drawing up the official contract agreement, all three Gryffindors signed it. After chatting for a bit, Fred and George left to go and locate their younger brother and see about starting their test trials of some newly developed pranks.

When the train pulled into Kings Cross Station, which was located in the northwestern part of London, Harry and Hermione, already dressed in Muggle clothes, allowed the others in their compartment to head out first. Once they were alone, they quickly grabbed their trunks and, after casting a weightless charm on them, Disillusioned themselves and their trunks and snuck off the train. After watching their friends meet up with their parents and head off, Harry and Hermione waited as the Dursleys came and grew frustrated when Harry never appeared. After waiting for around half an hour, the

Dursleys left in a huff, Vernon mumbling something about giving the old codger a piece of his mind.

Barely containing their laughter, Harry and Hermione removed the Disillusionment Charm and placed a glamour on themselves to hide their true appearances. Now looking like a couple of teenagers of Irish descent, the two entered Muggle London and hailed a cab.

- Hogwarts -

Minerva McGonagall was relaxing in her quarters, after spending the last few hours finishing up paperwork, when she heard a knock on her door. Telling the person the door was open, Professor McGonagall was surprised to see a house elf enter her quarters, carrying a small package.

"This package be arriving for you," the house elf stated. Upon taking the package from the house elf, Minerva was surprised to see that it was from Harry and Hermione.

Why do I get the feeling I am not going to like what I find in this package? Minerva thought as the house elf popped away.

Minerva gasped when she opened up the package to find the snapped remains of two very familiar wands, along with a note. Upon reading the note, Minerva began cursing heavily in Gaelic. Calming herself, Minerva placed the remains of the wands of two of her best students in a secured box, and went back to her study to write a letter she hoped would find its way to Harry and Hermione.

- The Leaky Cauldron -

Thanking the cab driver for the lift, Harry and Hermione entered The Leaky Cauldron and went up to the register where the owner, Tom, was drying a goblet.

Upon seeing the two teenagers, Tom put down the glass he was drying and asked, "Can I help you two young folk?"

Imitating Seamus Finnegan's accent, Harry replied, "Yes sir, my name is Alric Connors, and this is my cousin Heather. We were wondering if we could rent one of your rooms for a few days. We're

in town visiting family, but due to an invasion of relatives, sleeping spots are lacking."

"Understandable lad," Tom replied, "I'm the third eldest of three boys and four girls. At the moment, we have one room left. It's a medium sized room, but it only has one bed. I can supply another cot if you'd like."

"The room sounds perfect, sir," Hermione stated. "The cot would be most appreciated as well."

Harry and Hermione signed the register, and upon receiving their room key, headed up to the room to drop off their trunks. Deciding to head into Diagon Alley for lunch, Harry and Hermione told Tom they would worry about the extra cot when they returned.

As Harry and Hermione walked around Diagon Alley, they would occasionally enter a shop and browse around, in keeping with the image they were visiting the area. Stopping by one of the many cafés, they decided to stop and grab a bite to eat. While they were eating lunch, Harry and Hermione discussed what to do first. "The first thing we should do is look into getting you some clothes which actually fit you. I should probably look as well, given the fact we've both grown over the year," Hermione suggested.

"I agree," Harry replied. "We could both also use new trunks. Preferably ones that have charms built into them."

Finishing their lunch, the two paid for their meal and headed to Gringotts, as they remembered they had a meeting with Griphook about the actions being taken against Dumbledore.

"Greetings Lord and Lady Potter," Griphook said as they were shown into his office. "May your gold flow and multiply."

"Greetings Griphook," Harry and Hermione replied. "May your enemies' blood freeze and their blades shatter."

Nodding in approval, Griphook asked if there was anything he could do for them before they discussed their actions against Dumbledore.

"Both Hermione and I have decided that it is in our best interests not to return to Hogwarts next year," Harry replied. "We've made

arrangements to complete our training elsewhere. Given the nature of our training, I suspect we will be unreachable for at least the summer. If it is going to be longer, we will contact you."

"This is acceptable," Griphook stated as he noted this in a large ledger in front of him. "I appreciate the forewarning."

With that, Griphook continued, "At the moment, Gringotts is preparing to file the following charges against one Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore: illegal handling of legal Wizarding wills, withholding information concerning blood heritage from a Wizarding minor who had rights to said information, and misappropriation of trust fund money of Wizarding minor. These charges are being filed in the goblin nation since they have affected Gringotts business practices and code of conduct. If he is found guilty by the goblin high council, all of the Dumbledore vaults will be seized in compensation, as we are unable to sentence wizards to normal goblin sentences. We are sending a file over to your Ministry, but, due to Dumbledore's influence, we are not expecting much to happen."

Griphook proceeded to pass over a set of documents and instructed both Harry and Hermione where to sign to authorize the bank to proceed with filing charges against Albus Dumbledore. Upon signing the documents, Harry told Griphook to double whatever fee he was getting for handling this issue for them. Griphook stated that he was merely doing his job, and the fact that he got a chance to screw with Dumbledore was thanks enough. Hermione, however, insisted keeping Albus Bloody Dumbledore out of their hair was more than deserving of the added fees.

As Griphook was not used to dealing with humans who seemed to possess common courtesy, he merely nodded in acceptance while appearing slightly surprised.

After Harry and Hermione had finished with the paperwork, Harry withdrew a vial of silvery liquid from his pocket. "This is my memory of the events surrounding the end of the Tri-Wizard tournament. My beloved here is the only other one who knows its contents. Since I believe most wizards and witches would either denounce the information as lies, determine how they could use the information to their own advantage, or are too trusting of other people in the previous categories, I decided it should be shared with someone who would do right by it. I, Hadrian James Potter, swear on my

magic and life that this memory is an unaltered copy of my memory of the events following the final task of the Tri-Wizard tournament."

"The Goblin High Council is not going to like this information is it?" Griphook asked.

"As it deals with Voldemort," Harry replied, "probably not. Never the less, I believe the goblins have a right to know what is happening."

Upon hearing what the memory entailed, Griphook immediately sent the vial off with a note explaining it's contents. After promising Griphook that they would be willing to speak to the Goblin High Council should the goblins require it, Harry and Hermione left Gringotts and headed to McFalon's Trunk Emporium.

Jacob McFalon was thinking of closing up his store early today when he heard the door open, admitting two teenagers to his shop. "Can I help you?" he said.

As Harry and Hermione came up to the counter, Harry replied, "Yes sir, we are in need of new trunks and were told this was the place to go for top of the line models. Before you ask, money is not an issue."

"Very good to hear," Jacob McFalon replied. "What kind of trunk were you looking for?"

"We are looking for two multi-compartment trunks," Hermione answered. "In regard to the compartments, one of them must be able to hold a variety of potion ingredients and equipment, and the another must be able to hold several hundred books."

"We would also prefer trunks which are self shrinking and have some form of security on them," Harry added.

"I believe I have exactly what you are looking for," Jacob McFalon answered as he brought them over to a row of trunks. "These trunks have four compartments, one of which was designed specifically for keeping potion ingredients fresh and standard potions equipment safe from damage. Another compartment was designed as a portable library capable of holding up to 700 large tomes. Upon activating this compartment a ladder appears to allow an authorized user of the trunk to descend into the compartment which will appear

as a small library containing bookshelves. The remaining two compartments are standard compartments with size charms built into them to allow for more storage space. Each trunk can be set to allow for restricted access, you simply allow a drop of blood to fall on the latch and the trunk will be keyed to that specific individual. If multiple access is required, then simply combine the drops of blood before allowing the mixture to touch the latch. Once the trunk has been keyed, it can only be re-keyed by bringing it back to the shop and proving you are the true owner of the trunk."

Conferring through their bond for a few minutes, Harry and Hermione told the man that they would take two of them - immediately if possible. Jacob McFalon agreed readily, and after ringing up the two trunks, explained the operation of the standard built-in charms. After shrinking the trunks to the size of a deck of cards, Harry and Hermione headed off to get new clothes.

- Gringotts Bank -

Albus Dumbledore was beginning to lose his patience. The goblins had been keeping him waiting for the past hour. Bloody goblins. They're the ones who asked for this meeting, yet they have the nerve to keep me waiting, Albus thought angrily. A few minutes later a goblin came into the waiting room, and directed Albus to Griphook's office.

"Please sit down Dumbledore," Griphook replied in an irritated tone. "As I have several more important things to get done today, I will get straight to the point. You have been charged with and found guilty by the Goblin High Council of the following charges: illegal handling of legal Wizarding wills, withholding information concerning blood heritage from a Wizarding minor who had rights to said information, and misappropriation of trust fund money of a Wizarding minor. Seeing as the evidence against you was a collection of various Gringotts financial documents along with various Ministry documents, the Goblin High Council deemed your presence at the trial was not necessary. As a result of the delivered verdict of guilty, all of your assets here at Gringotts have been seized and distributed amongst the bank and the two Wizarding minors involved. You are henceforth banned from ever holding an account at Gringotts. At this time you have two choices: leave Gringotts peacefully or be physically thrown out of this establishment."

As Griphook read through the charges, one thing kept running through Albus Dumbledore's mind, Bloody hell, this can't be happening. Where could these creatures have come up with this information? After Griphook had finished, Albus in as polite a tone as he could muster asked, "Who are these minors I have supposedly wronged? I demand the right to defend myself against these trumped up charges."

"You can demand all you want wizard," Griphook stated with a toothy grin, "it will change nothing. As to the identities of the minors involved, given the time which has elapsed, I can safely say they are one Hadrian James Potter and Hermione Jean Drake. Suffice to say, they were more than willing to provide evidence against you and authorized us to pursue appropriate action.

Upon hearing Harry and Hermione's name, Albus excused himself and quickly left the bank. As soon as he had cleared the wards surrounding Gringotts, Albus Apparated back to Hogwarts. Quickly making his way to his office, Albus headed toward a far wall and examined several silver instruments that were sitting on a shelf.

"Blast, the connections to Potter and Drake have been broken," Albus fumed as he saw that the monitoring devices were silent. "And the blood wards at Privet Drive are gone," he grumbled as he looked at a third device. "Without the boy there to recharge the wards, they've faded away. Given Potter's feelings for the Dursleys, there is no way to rebuild them. How could this have happened? Everything aspect of the plan had been accounted for and was proceeding along acceptable lines."

Pacing his office, Albus tried to come up with a reason as to how his carefully constructed master plan had fallen apart. Eventually he stumbled onto the cause of all his problems sitting on his desk: the Tri-Wizard trophy. Of course, once his name had been drawn from the Goblet of Fire and no one disputed the result, Potter must have started to see the pattern of manipulation in his life. With Granger, or I guess I should say Drake, believing that he had nothing to do with his name coming out of the Goblet of Fire, it would only have been a matter of time before they started to compare notes and realize what was going on. A simple trip to Gringotts would have uncovered the rest, and both had gone there over Christmas break in order to do holiday shopping. Realizing there was a good chance the two of them had gone underground, he needed to find them quickly if he

was to get things back under his control. Going over to the fireplace, Albus started making Floo calls.

- Leaky Cauldron -

Tired from the afternoon of heavy shopping, Harry and Hermione decided to simply dump their re-enlarged purchases onto the bed in their room. Deciding that a shower was needed after the train ride and their excursion into Diagon Alley, they took turns getting cleaned up. Once they had cleaned up and put on fresh clothes, the two former Gryffindors headed downstairs.

Seeing Tom at his usual spot, they went up to him and asked what was on the menu for dinner that evening.

"Evening you two," Tom replied warmly. "Tonight we have venison with mashed potatoes, corn, and a chicken and rice soup."

"Sounds delicious," Harry stated while Hermione nodded in agreement. "We'll both have a plate of that."

"Will do," Tom said as he wrote it down. "I'll have someone bring it out when it's ready."

They found an empty booth off in a corner of the pub, and made themselves comfortable and chatting idly about the events of the school year as they waited for their food. Around fifteen minutes later their food arrived and Harry and Hermione settled into eating.

As they were eating their meal and discussing what they planned on doing the next day, Harry noticed Albus Dumbledore enter the pub and begin to look around anxiously. "Love, look who just showed up," Harry whispered to Hermione as he tilted his head toward the hidden entrance to Diagon Alley. Upon seeing Dumbledore, Hermione stated, "Five sickles says he's looking for us."

"No bet," Harry said with a chuckle.

Putting up a Notice-Me-Not ward around their booth, Harry and Hermione cast an eavesdropping charm, and listened in on the conversation that Dumbledore was having with Tom.

"Have you seen young Harry Potter lately, Tom?" Albus asked.

"No sir," Tom replied with a puzzled look on his face. "It being the end of the school year, I figured he'd be back at his relatives' for the summer."

"Very true, Tom," Albus confirmed. "I went over there, but no one was around. They've probably just gone on vacation. I figured it couldn't hurt to check here though, just in case he had stopped by before heading off with his relatives. What I needed to discuss with him can wait until the start of the new school year."

Bidding Tom a good evening, Albus headed back to Diagon Alley. Walking through the streets, Albus thought, Hopefully Minerva is back from wherever she has gone off to. If Potter and Drake confided in any of the staff, it would be her. With Tom back in the game, I need to be able to control the Potter boy so I can ensure things go as planned. With this in mind, Albus Apparated back to Hogwarts in search of Minerva.

Back at The Leaky Cauldron, Harry and Hermione had finished their dinner and had gone back to their room, where, after setting up several security wards, they removed the glamours on themselves and settled in for the evening.

Before climbing into bed with Hermione, Harry took out a vial containing a pale blue liquid.

"Is that the Raggiungere Potion you were brewing last week?" Hermione asked.

"Yep, I finished it shortly before the last task of the tournament," Harry replied as he downed the potion designed to reverse the years of abuse and neglect he had endured at the hands of the Dursleys.

Harry put the vial down on the night stand before beckoning Hermione to his arms. She snuggled up to him, resting her head on his chest while he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close. It was not long before they had both drifted off to sleep.

- Burrow -

Ronald Bilius Weasley was lying on top of his bed, very pleased with how things had worked out between his family and him. Gullible

idiots, the lot of them, Ron thought as he considered the events which occurred earlier that evening.

- FLASHBACK -

The Weasley Family were all sitting around their modest living room, when Ron got up and went to his room, stating he would be right back, as he had something important to tell the family.

Looking at Ginny, Fred, and George, Molly Weasley asked, "Do any of you know what this is about?"

"No idea, mum," Fred replied.

"Who knows what the git is up to these days," George continued.

Ginny was about to comment, when Ron came back downstairs holding what looked like an old journal of some sort. He also had a tired look on his face. Suddenly, the reason behind Ron's actions this past year became clear to Ginny. "Bloody hell!" Ginny exclaimed. "That explains everything."

"Ginevra Molly Weasley!" her mother scolded. "Watch your language, young lady. Now what do you mean by that outburst?"

"Why I've acted the way I have been this year," Ron answered. Turning to his sister, he smiled and said, "I figured you'd be the first to put it together, Ginny. I think I've got a pretty good idea what it was like for you during your first year at Hogwarts."

This statement resulted in everyone in the room gasping. Handing the journal to his father, Ron stated, "I present to you the journal of Artus Weasley. Personally, I recommend it either be burnt to ash, or handed over to someone like Dumbledore for safe keeping."

Arthur's eyes widened at hearing that the journal in his hands was the same journal in which his uncle wrote all his thoughts, ideas, and knowledge. In the entire written history of the Weasley Family, no one had ever gone dark, until Artus Weasley thumbed his nose at the Light, and joined with Gellert Grindelwald during the last World War. It was known that Artus kept a journal, but no trace of it had ever been found after his death. Looking at his youngest son, Arthur asked, "How?"

"I received it via post owl at the beginning of the year. I never did figure out who sent it to me," Ron explained. "You've told us stories about Great Uncle Artus joining Grindelwald's forces and how nobody could figure out what had caused him to forsake the Light. I figured the answer might lay somewhere in his journal - I was hoping to find the answer so it wouldn't be a mystery anymore. It's almost like I needed to know why he joined the Dark." Hanging his head in shame, Ron said in a quiet voice, "After what happened to Ginny, I should have been more careful. Instead I jumped into things without thinking, as usual, and ended up alienating my family and probably wrecking my friendship with Harry and Hermione. Not to mention what I did to Neville."

Putting his hand on Ron's shoulder, Arthur smiled and said, "That is the danger of dark magic, son. It's seductive and subtle. From what I can sense from this journal even while it's closed, it gives off an aura of dark magic. Probably set to play on a person's weaknesses and wants. The fact that you realized what was happening and were able to resist it, says a lot about your character and desire to do what is right. I'm proud of you son, and I say we end this journal's power immediately."

Going over to the fire, Arthur tossed the dark journal into the fire. A roar of flames exploded upwards into the chimney and then died back down to normal. A few minutes later, the book had been reduced to ash. Turning back to the rest of the Weasleys, Arthur stated it was over. Rushing over to her youngest son, Molly engulfed him in one of her back breaking hugs, thanking anyone who could hear, that she had gotten her son back. Ginny came up to Ron and after giving him a hug of her own, apologized for not seeing what was going on sooner. Fred and George clapped him on the back stating that they were glad to have their brother back and that they were impressed with him for breaking the journal's hold on him.

- END OF FLASHBACK -

Returning to the present, Ron was glad he had had the foresight to make a duplicate of the journal, and place several charms onto the original to back up his story. With Ginny's experience with the diary, it made my story all the more believable. Especially now that Dumbledore is telling people the Dark Lord has returned, the fools think some Death Eater was making a preemptive strike against the

Weasley Family, as they know the Weasleys will side with Dumbledore in the upcoming conflict. With my "return" to the Light, I'll be in a position to report on anything I come across. Draco stated he would pass the word along about my true allegiance to Daphne and the others.

Heading downstairs, Ron told his mother he'd be out in the paddock practicing his flying, as he wanted to stay in practice for Quidditch next year. As he was flying around the paddock, Ron reminded himself he would need to let Draco know that the plan was working, and he was once again in the good graces of his family.

- Hogwarts -

The next morning, Albus Dumbledore managed to track Minerva McGonagall down in her office, to ask if she had heard from Potter or Drake. Two seconds later, Albus was wishing he hadn't found Minerva before she had finished her morning tea.

Shoving a piece of parchment in his face, Minerva demanded an explanation before she got even more irritated. Taking the hint, Albus sat down in a chair, and began to read what was on the parchment. His immediate reaction was to think, There is no way I'm going to be able to explain this one to Minerva without making things worse.

Dear Professor McGonagall,

Harry and I hope this letter finds you well, and sitting down. Due to the circumstances regarding our treatment in the British Wizarding World and the blatant withholding of information, to which we have every right, Harry and I have decided to withdraw ourselves from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and pursue interests elsewhere. Given that, let us assure you, your help and advice has always been above reproach and we will treasure the time we had as your students and members of the Gryffindor House. May the Founders watch over Hogwarts in the times ahead.

Sincerely,

Hermione Granger and Harry Potter

P.S. Enclosed, if you haven't already figured it out, are the remains of our wands. Seeing as we will no longer need them where we are going, the two of us felt that it was only right that we leave them with you.

Handing the letter back to Minerva, Albus replied with a sigh, "Honestly, I have no idea what to make of it Minerva, save that Harry and Hermione seem to feel they have been mistreated somehow and have decided to return to the Muggle world. As the letter states they left without their wands, they have no intention of returning."

Minerva looked at her old friend suspiciously, but could not find any deception in his voice or face. "Alright, Albus," Minerva replied. "You've never lied to me before, so I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt for now. What do you suggest we do about the situation? I've checked both the Dursleys and the Grangers, and it appears not only have they not been at either residence, but nobody seems worried they're missing. Petunia and Vernon's son is the only one who seems to care Harry is missing, and that's only because he actually has to do chores."

"Given that they both grew up in the Muggle world, they could effectively disappear until they want to be found," Albus replied. "The only thing we can do at the moment is alert their friends, and ask they contact us if they hear from Harry or Hermione."

After Minerva left, Albus breathed a sigh of relief, he honestly couldn't believe she bought his explanation. It just goes to show I was sorted into Slytherin for a reason, he thought. Unfortunately, he was not lying when he said there was not much they could do at the moment. They would have to wait until either Potter or Drake made the first move.

- The Leaky Cauldron -

When Harry woke up on Sunday morning, the first thing he realized was that his pajamas seemed to be two sizes too small. Quickly enlarging them, Harry climbed out of bed and went to the bathroom to look in the mirror. When he got there he was amazed at what he saw - not only had he grown several inches overnight, he had also filled out a touch more as well. His eyesight seemed to have improved as well. I'd have to say the potion worked, Harry thought to

himself with a grin. It was then that his stomach started to inform him food was in definite need and in large quantities.

"Bloody hell, love," Hermione replied as she walked into the bathroom. "The Potions Mistress definitely knew her stuff when she developed that potion."

Harry nodded in agreement. Once they had showered and dressed for the day, Harry and Hermione headed downstairs for some much needed breakfast. While they ate their breakfast, Harry and Hermione made plans for the day. Periodically, they would catch snippets of conversations from the tables around them. The main topic of conversation was the results of Tri-Wizard tournament, but they would often hear people chat about work and the like.

Once they had paid for their breakfast, Harry and Hermione left the pub and journeyed out into Muggle London. They spent the day wandering the city and enjoying the sites. Upon returning to the pub, later that evening, they had a light dinner and retired to their room for the rest of the evening.

The following morning, Harry and Hermione were downstairs eating breakfast when they heard a voice from behind them say, "Would either of you two mind if I joined you for breakfast?"

Turning around, Harry and Hermione saw Dari Àrmann standing there. "Not at all," Hermione said. "We were wondering when you were going to be meeting us here."

"Due to the excellent work on your glamours," Dari Àrmann confessed, "it took longer than I expected to locate you. I take it from the fact neither of you returned to your guardians' homes and you are under a glamour, you wish to accept my offer."

Upon receiving confirmation of this Dari Àrmann motioned them to follow him back up to the room he had been renting for the past several months. Once there, Dari Àrmann put up several security wards before turning to Harry and Hermione and saying, "First off, I am glad you have decided to accept my offer, as I feel it can only help you. Secondly, I would like for you to tell me what you have taught yourselves as I can tell you have abandoned the path Hogwarts forces on its students, and have forged your own paths. This is something I whole heartily approve of."

Knowing the druid would not judge them for what they had done, Harry and Hermione spent the next hour and half describing all that they had accomplished, from learning how to harness their magic without a wand and their Elemental abilities, to their Animagus forms and their current studies in Necromancy and Blood Magic. All the while, Dari Àrmann simply sat back and listened, occasionally asking questions about their views on certain things. When they were finished, Harry and Hermione looked on waiting for the druid to speak.

"I have to say that I am thoroughly impressed with the level of work you both have accomplished," Dari Àrmann said with a warm smile. "Given what you have already succeeded in doing, I don't foresee either of you having problems with the training I have in mind. As you know, I am a druid and I follow the ancient ways - what I have in mind is to take you both under my wing and train you in the ways of the Druidic Order. Make no mistake, this path will not be easy and I will be holding you to the same high standards as any neophyte would be held to."

Both Harry and Hermione were floored with what they had just been told. During their research of the Ogham Runes, they managed to learn a few things about the Druidic Order, one of which was that they held themselves and those they taught to extremely high standards and oaths of loyalty and secrecy were common. Neither Light nor Dark, the druids followed more of a Gray path.

"I've got a question sir," Harry asked. "I read while the druids were the followers of the ancient Celtic Gods as a whole, individual druids often related to one or two of them more than the others. I was curious as to whether or not this was the case with you?"

Nodding, Dari Àrmann replied, "It is. While I pay homage to the eight Celtic Gods, my patron gods, as it were, are Cernunnos and Taranis."

"The horned god of the forest and the god of storms," Hermione stated.

"In the most basic terms, yes," Dari Àrmann stated, pleased they had already made an effort to learn about the druids and their beliefs. "Although their dominion is greater than simply the forest and storms.

To begin with, I will be instructing you in the philosophy held by the druids and teaching you the basics of Druidic Magic. For now though, we will head out as soon as you're done packing your things."

Harry and Hermione returned to their room to finish packing what little they had not already packed, and after shrinking their trunks down, met Dari Àrmann back downstairs where they paid Tom the remainder of their rent and followed the druid out into Muggle London. From there the three of them walked down into an alley. Looking around to ensure they were not being watched, Dari Àrmann took an intricately carved piece of stone out of his pocket. Instructing his new students to place a hand on the stone, Dari Àrmann activated the Portkey and transported the three of them back to his cottage deep within an ancient forest.

Chapter 12: Summer of Learning

In a secluded clearing, deep within an ancient forest, two figures could be seen sparring with quarterstaves. They had been going at it for around thirty minutes when a third figure came into the clearing.

"Alright you two," Dari Àrmann called out, "that's enough sparring for right now. Dinner is almost ready, so you'll have just enough time to go and get washed up in the creek."

"Alright, sir," Harry replied as he shrunk his quarterstaff down and put it in a pouch at his side.

"Race you to the creek, Harry," Hermione said as she took off toward the cottage where they had been staying the past month.

Laughing as he raced after his girlfriend, Harry thought a swim in the creek by the cottage would do wonders for his sore muscles.

Watching as the two teenagers raced through the forest. It's good to see those two laughing and enjoying themselves. Their destiny can wait a while. They need enjoy life, as well as prepare for what the fates have in store for them. The Dark Lords of the prophecy won't be around forever, and their defeat shouldn't be the sole purpose of their lives, the druid thought as he walked back to the cottage.

During dinner, Dari Àrmann informed Harry and Hermione that this evening he would be testing them on all he had been teaching them on the philosophy of the druids and how they viewed the world. Nodding, they quickly finished their dinner, and after clearing their places met their teacher outside by the fire that had been lit.

"Over the past month," Dari Àrmann started, "you have been taught the beliefs and ways of the druid. It is now time to see what you have learned." Turning to Harry, Dari Àrmann asked, "Please tell me the three major realms of existence, describing each of them in turn."

"The three major realms are the Underworld, the Midrealm, and the Heavens," Harry replied. "The Underworld is the place of our ancestors, the Daoine Sidhe, and the home of the gods whose domain consists wholly or partially of this realm. From these lands issue bounty and new life, the wisdom of memory can be found here."

The Midrealm consists of the physical lands that the mortal and many immortal kin reside. The Midrealm itself is divided into the Land, Sea, and Sky. Certain ancestors and gods dwell in the Midrealm choosing to remain close to their descendants or reside where their domain is strongest. This realm exists between the Underworld and the Heavens, touch both in a few places, but such portals are guarded by servants of the gods that dwell there. Where the power of the Underworld is the pattern of the world order, the Heavens are places of the brightest gods, the Shining Ones, and those mortals who have been welcomed into these realms of Light. From the sun, moon, and stars come the pattern of existence, the wisdom of perspective and the objective eye, and the clarity of thought and will."

Smiling, Dari Àrmann replied, "Well said Harry." Turning to Hermione, Dari Àrmann asked, "Who are the three Kindreds?"

"The three Kindred are the Gods, the Ancestors, and the Spirits," Hermione replied. "The Gods include not only the Celtic Gods, but also the gods of all other faiths; from the single god worshiped by the Christians, Hebrews, and Muslims, to the multitude of gods worshiped by the Hindu people. The Ancestors are the spirits of those who have gone before us. While most continue on to their respective afterlife, for good or ill, some return to the Midrealm to guide and watch over their descendants. Lastly, are the multitude of Spirits. They are as varied as there are grains of sand on the shore. They range from the manifestations of the elements to the powerful servants of the gods. Their tasks are as numerous and varied as the Spirits themselves, and they are forces for Good, Evil, and the delicate Balance between."

"Excellent answer Hermione," Dari Àrmann stated. He then continued going back and forth between Harry and Hermione, asking various questions about the druid's role in society and the structure and hierarchy of the Druidic Order itself. Dari Àrmann then went on to ask questions about the individual gods of the Celtic people that the Druids worshiped and followed, and about the various Spirits the druids commonly dealt with.

Around an hour later, Dari Àrmann declared both Harry and Hermione had indeed learned what he had been teaching. "I am proud of both of you," Dari Àrmann said as he placed a hand on both the two teenagers' shoulders. "Before going any further,

however, I ask again, do you wish to continue with the training and formally take up the path of the druid? As I stated at the start, it will not be an easy path, and it demands a lifetime commitment. This isn't just about defeating Dark Lords, but declaring your chosen path in life."

"Sir," Hermione spoke up. "While both Harry and I want to continue on the Druidic Path, how would this affect our studies in Blood Magic and Necromancy?"

"That is very valid question," Dari Àrmann replied with a smile. "You need not worry, however, as neither Blood Magic nor Necromancy are in of themselves counter to the Druidic Path. Magic, as I am sure you both understand, is neither Good or Evil nor Light or Dark, but simply is. That said, I encourage you both to continue your studies in those areas. Given your elemental affinities, your control over those magics will be better than most. I myself, being attuned to the elemental force of Earth lean toward the art of alchemy."

"We didn't think there would be an issue, but we weren't certain," Harry explained.

"Given what you have been continually told at Hogwarts for the past four years, it's understandable," Dari Àrmann replied. "Given that you both are willing to fully dedicate yourselves to the Druidic Path, it is time for the next step: to see if one of the ancient gods will agree to become your patron. Do not worry if this does not happen as not every druid has a patron, most worship the gods equally. For those few who are blessed with the attention of a particular god or gods, they tend to keep their prayers and offerings, barring the holy days, geared toward their patrons. I myself, as I have said before, follow the gods Cernunnos and Taranis."

"From everything we've learned," Hermione asked with a puzzled look, "having a patron god was rare, but to have two?"

Smiling, Dari Àrmann answered, "My situation is a bit unique. My primary patron, for lack of a better term, is Cernunnos. My connection with the God of Storms is a bit difficult to explain. Suffice to say, I do consider him a second patron." Standing up, Dari Àrmann motioned for Harry and Hermione to follow him toward the stone altar that was just on the other side of the cottage. There, Harry and Hermione placed offerings on the altar and, upon kneeling

in front of the altar, began a simple chant, offering themselves up in service to the ancient gods of their ancestors. As they chanted, they opened up their minds and spirits to be judged by forces greater than themselves.

- Harry's POV -

As Harry chanted, his vision blurred and he soon found himself deep within unfamiliar woods, but Harry didn't feel scared at all. Instead, he felt strangely at home surrounded by the thick trees. As he looked around, a white mist rolled in and soon covered the ground.

"Hadrian James Potter, welcome to my domain," a voice called out.

Turning toward the direction from where the voice came, Harry saw a cloaked figure walk up through the mist. As it got closer, Harry saw the figure was a man dressed in the simple clothes of a woodsman. Coming out of his head was a set of antlers similar to that of a stag. Around his neck was a golden torc and coiled around his left arm was a brownish green snake.

Cernunnos, Harry thought as the man motioned for him to have a seat on a nearby stump.

"You are correct in your assumption as to my name," the ancient god replied. "I have watched you for a long time my lad. Even before you returned to the magical world, you faced many obstacles and trials, but you never let anything discourage you, not even your so-called family. I'm proud to see that you've turned into a fine young man. I am also glad to see you've chosen to return to the faith of your parents."

Startled at this, Harry asked, "My parents were druids?"

"Druids, no," Cernunnos replied. "They did, however, follow the beliefs and practices of their ancestors. Your paternal grandfather was a follower of Lugh, and is probably where your father got his mischievousness from. Your mother, while a follower of the Christian god as a child, returned to the Old Ways when she got older."

Harry's heart almost burst with pride, as he learned of this new information about his parents. This makes me even more determined to learn all that I can, Harry thought to himself.

The lad has spirit, the ancient god thought as he made his decision. "Hadrian," Cernunnos stated in a formal tone, which got Harry's attention. "You have stayed true to your beliefs and never backed down, yet you understand the necessity for a balance between the Light and the Darkness. Simply put, I have deemed you worthy of my patronage."

Remembering his actions in the graveyard several weeks previously, Harry looked down at his feet and humbly asked, "How can I be worthy of any god's patronage when my actions caused Voldemort to return?"

Cernunnos smiled and putting a hand on Harry's shoulder and gently said, "You have a lot to learn about the world, lad." Seeing Harry's confused look, he continued. "True, by allowing your godfather to take your blood, the ritual used to return that creature to corporeal form was successful, to a point. The crux of the matter is that if your blood was not used, than someone else would have been chosen. That person may not have had the skills needed to escape. Whereas you went into the situation prepared and were able to make the best of a bad situation. Subconsciously, you knew this and accepted it."

Thinking about what he had just been told, Harry had to admit that Cernunnos was right. The only reason Sirius didn't kill him was probably out of some residual loyalty to the Marauders. This reasoning, however, brought up another question. "So Voldemort would have found a way to return with or without my blood?" Harry asked.

Nodding, Cernunnos replied with a sigh, "Voldemort's return was unavoidable, as his time in the Midrealm is far from over. Fate will not be denied by anyone; even the gods must bow to her. All we can do is to help steer things in our favor and hope for the best. Now return to the Midrealm knowing my blessings are upon you. Learn well my young druid and fulfill your destiny."

With that Cernunnos reached forward and placed a palm on the young wizard's forehead. Harry felt a sharp pain in his scar and saw nothing but black.

- Hermione's POV -

As Hermione chanted, her vision blurred and she soon found herself on a mountain top overlooking a vast valley below. Directly behind her was an opening into the mountain. The opening itself was shaped like an archway surrounded by strange runes. Listening to her instincts, Hermione walked through the archway and followed the hallway that appeared to be cut into the inside of the mountain.

Hermione soon found herself in a large room resembling a very large library. Off in one corner was a huge fireplace with a roaring fire in it, and seated on a cushioned chair with her bare feet propped up on a stool in front of the fire was a young woman with fiery red hair dressed in a simple gown reading a book. The woman paused for a moment before setting the book down and rising from her chair, walked toward Hermione.

"Hermione Jean Drake," the woman stated. "It's good to finally meet you face to face. My name is Brigid and I would like to chat with you for a moment."

Brigid, the Goddess of Fire and Wisdom, wants to have a chat with me! Hermione thought to herself not quite believing what she had just heard.

Chuckling, Brigid stated, "You never did give yourself enough credit, lass. Now please sit down with me by the fire." As Hermione settled herself down, Brigid continued, "I've been watching you for some time now my dear, even before your discovery of the magical world. I've seen you put up with ridicule from your peers and indifference from those who called themselves your parents. I am proud to see you've risen above this and have become a fine young woman. Not to mention that you've already found your life mate. Hold tight to that bond, lass, as he will never let you down. From what I've seen of him, betrayal is not in the lad's character."

No thanks to his bloody relatives, Hermione thought with irritation.

"Language lass," Brigid said sternly in a motherly tone, "although you are not mistaken."

Hermione blushed and looked down apologetically, as she realized that Brigid could easily see her thoughts.

Smiling, Brigid continued, her voice taking on a more formal tone, "Hermione, my child, you've shown yourself to not only seek out wisdom, but strive to make use of what you have learned; not to mention the fire that burns within you. Now return to the Midrealm knowing my blessings are upon you. Learn well my young druid and fulfill your destiny."

With that Brigid reached forward and placed a palm on the young witch's forehead. Hermione suddenly felt lightheaded and saw nothing but black.

- Headmaster's Office at Hogwarts -

Albus Dumbledore's summer had not been a pleasant one so far. After a month and a half of searching, he was still no closer to tracking down Potter and Drake. Fawkes was even unable to track them down as of yet, but was still out looking. As neither Ollivander nor any of Albus' contacts in Knockturn Alley had learned of either of the two getting their hands on replacement wands. This fact told Albus they had gone Muggle and thus would be next to impossible to track down. Given what he knew about the Potter and Drake estates, it was conceivable that they could be in any number of countries, especially with Gringotts help in obtaining the necessary paperwork needed to get through customs.

With Tom's network of informants, he will soon learn of Potter's disappearance. Now that the wards are gone from the Dursleys residence they are vulnerable to the Death Eaters. Without their permission, I can't place protective wards on their house, and they refuse to leave. I can't risk using the Imperious Curse on them to get them to leave, as it leaves too many possibilities for error. Albus paced in his office, trying to come up with a solution to salvage his plans. He did not dare use any of his contacts in the Ministry, as Cornelius Fudge was having those who seemed sympathetic to Dumbledore's cause watched. Albus needed those people in the Ministry to keep an eye out for suspicious activity, especially now that Tom was back and would inevitably be using his followers in the Ministry to further his plans.

Suddenly Albus' fireplace flared up, signaling that someone was trying to contact him via the Floo. Walking over to the fireplace, Albus saw that it was Amelia Bones, the Head of the DMLE. "How can I be of assistance Amelia?"

"You can start by explaining to me why I received a letter from Harry Potter and Hermione Granger, stating that due to your misconduct and blatant abuse of authority they have decided to leave the Wizarding World," Amelia Bones said with irritation.

Bloody Hell, Albus paled. They didn't!

- An ancient forest somewhere in England -

Harry and Hermione snapped out of their trance with a start. Shaking their heads to help clear their vision, they slowly got to their feet.

"Takes a bit getting used to," Dari Àrmann said as he helped the two to their feet. "I take it that given the looks on your faces and the tattoos on the sides of your necks, you've been chosen by one of the gods?"

They both nodded in confirmation, with Harry motioning for Hermione to go first. "I found myself in what appeared to be a large library with a huge fireplace off to one corner with a woman reading by it. She called me over to her and introduced herself as Brigid. After talking for a bit, she sent me back here." Hermione explained. She then asked, "What tattoos are you referring to?"

Conjuring a mirror for her, Dari Àrmann handed it to Hermione. Using the mirror, Hermione saw she indeed have a tattoo of a ball of fire on the left side of her neck. Dari Àrmann explained it showed Brigid had granted Hermione her patronage. Getting the mirror from Hermione, Harry looked and saw that he had a tattoo of a golden torc with a snake wrapped around it. Seeing that it was his turn, Harry described how he was in a forest and was met by a man with antlers coming out of his head. Like Hermione did with Brigid, Harry had sat down with Cernunnos and talked for a bit. After explaining a few things, Cernunnos had sent him back, although his scar had flared up in pain right before he returned.

Smiling, Dari Àrmann asked, "What scar would that be?"

Turning to Hermione, Harry asked confused, "Love, he didn't bump his head or anything recently did he?"

Gasping as she saw what Dari Àrmann was referring to, Hermione pointed out, "Harry, your scar is gone!"

Quickly using the mirror he still had in his hand, Harry saw the scar, which had been the bane of his existence since he returned to the Wizarding World, was gone. After opening and closing his mouth several times, all Harry could get out was, "How?"

"My guess is that Cernunnos saw the scar as something which was a serious problem for you, and simply removed it. The fact that it was the result of a failed killing curse, probably had something to do with it, as curse scars can often have unforeseen effects on a person," Dari Àrmann explained.

"That makes sense," Harry replied. "Cernunnos also mentioned something about fulfilling my destiny."

"Brigid told me the same thing," Hermione added.

"The destiny they are referring to is tied in with the prophecy I mentioned when we first met," Dari Àrmann stated. "If you wish, I can reveal the entire prophecy to you, as it was given to me by Brigid over two centuries ago."

"Over two centuries!" Hermione exclaimed. "I knew being gifted with magic allowed us to live longer lives than Muggles, but I didn't think we could live that long. You look like you're barely in your thirties."

Laughing, Dari Àrmann replied, "Normally, you would be correct. Wizards and witches for the most part can live to be around 150 to 200 years old at the most, and even that is rare. My case is a bit unique, not to mention having a few disadvantages. But that is for another time. The prophecy concerning the two of you goes as follows:"

The time of the twin stars that hold the power to vanquish the Dark Lords approaches

the Raven child born at the sun's peak and the long arms' day belongs to the Fey child

as one is marked by death, the other by life, and they will have the power the Dark Lords know not

what was once hindered will be set free by two made one

the Powers of Fire and Shadow will meet ere the wheel turns

"As I stated when we first met," Dari Àrmann continued. "It was revealed to me that the two of you were the ones spoken of in the prophecy. I did some checking and the facts seem to support this claim. Harry, you were born on the summer solstice and your hair is the color of a raven. Hermione, you were born on Lughnasadh, a festival dedicated to the god Lugh, often called Lugh the Long Armed, and you are a descendant of Morgan LaFey. Your lives have both been marked, Harry, by his parents deaths and Hermione, by the life she was forced to live due to Dumbledore's interference. You have told me of the blocks on your magic and abilities that were broken when your life bond formed. Life mates are often referred to as 'two people in one'. Lastly your elemental abilities are Fire and Shadow."

"So essentially, it's up to us to defeat Voldemort and this other Dark Lord?" Harry asked.

"Not at all," Dari Àrmann replied. "The prophecy merely says the two of you would have the best chance at defeating them. It also never states you had to do it alone, or when. In my opinion, neither of you are quite ready yet. While you are both incredibly gifted, you still have a lot to learn, not to mention that most Dark Lords are no slouch when it comes to power, and they tend to have years of experience and knowledge to back their claims."

"So the wise thing to do," Hermione stated after thinking about it for a moment, "would be to continue doing what we have been doing. Continue learning the ways of the druids and mastering our other abilities, that way when the time comes for us to face them, we'll have a better chance."

"In other words," Harry added, "we live our lives on our terms and no one else's."

"That's exactly the kind of attitude I was hoping for," Dari said pleased with them. "The Wizarding World often waits until someone else comes along to clean up their messes, and I doubt it will be any different now."

"That is, when they actually admit that Voldemort has returned," Harry said with a huff.

"Short of Voldemort, himself, attacking in broad daylight," Hermione stated. "I think we can safely assume the Wizarding World will stick its head in the sand and ignore the problem."

"Not to mention this other Dark Lord, who is still a mystery. Although Dumbledore seems to fit the bill, given what all he's done for his so called 'Greater Good'." Harry added.

"I wonder if Dumbledore has seen Star Wars?" Hermione wondered out loud, as she had to agree with Harry's statement. Dumbledore's actions against them, and possibly others, didn't seem to fit the actions of someone claiming to be the Leader of the Light.

"I have to agree with you, Harry," Dari Àrmann stated. "Dumbledore hides behind the image of a benevolent wizard of Light, but he is, in reality, as manipulative and arrogant as Grindelwald was."

Seeing that it was getting late, he informed Harry and Hermione it was time to turn in for the night, and they would continue with their lessons in the morning.

- Riddle Manor -

The wizard, born to the name Tom Marvolo Riddle, Jr., was not in a good mood. The ritual designed to return him to his adult body, free of corruption and back to his full power, had succeeded only to a point. While he had regained his adult form, which was free of the corruption caused by his excessive use of the darkest magics, and he had been slowly regaining his magical power, his body was still weak and pale. After viewing Sirius Black's memory of the ritual several times, he had finally pinpointed what had gone wrong. When Black had taken the Potter boy's blood, he hadn't heard the boy whisper that he was welcome to it. That subtle change in the intent of the taking of the blood had weakened the power of the Resurrection Ritual. If I was as insane and evil as Dumbledore claims I am, I would have tortured Sirius severely for that mistake. Now that I am over the temporary madness caused by the shock of resurrection, however, I am quite sane and realize torturing my followers will only weaken them and breed dissent amongst them. I

would rather have strong wizards and witches that follow me out of loyalty and respect, as things tend to run smoother. I'll leave the fear and tyranny for dealing with my enemies and Muggles.

He was currently poring through his tomes and manuscripts, looking for a solution to his problem. Severus Snape had devised a strengthening potion that was counteracting the botched results, but it was only a temporary fix. Voldemort knew he needed a more permanent solution if he was to succeed in his plans.

The other thing that puzzled him was the Potter boy himself. From everything that he had been told, the boy should have been weak and no threat at all. Instead, Potter seemed anything but, not to mention his obvious skill in Necromancy. Apparently the boy was more cunning than he lead people to believe, Voldemort thought. While I know the prophecy Severus partially overheard all those years ago is a fake, there is something about Potter which worries me. I'll have Severus see what he can learn about the boy's upbringing and such.

As Voldemort was pouring through an ancient manuscript, a house elf popped in stating that Lucius Malfoy was requesting to see him on a matter of urgency.

"Thank you Wekes, show him in," Voldemort told the house elf.

Entering the study, Lucius Malfoy gave a bow to Voldemort before stating his reason for coming. "My contacts in the DMLE have reported that the Potter boy and a Mudblood by the name of Hermione Granger have sent off a letter to Dumbledore stating that they are leaving the Wizarding World for good. My contacts are in the process of trying to discover what might have caused this departure, although Amelia Bones is being tight lipped about the exact contents of the letter. I have feelers out in Muggle London to see if I can turn up anything."

"Excellent, Lucius," Voldemort said with a grin. "This type of distraction is just what we need to buy us time while we continue to consolidate our position. With Dumbledore no doubt scrambling to bring Potter back into his fold, and the Ministry scrambling to make sure the news of the departure of their precious Boy-Who-Lived does not make it to the general public, they'll be too busy to keep a

watchful eye on our supporters. Just to be sure, make sure the others tone down their fun for a bit."

"Thus making it seem like we were not involved and know nothing about it," Lucius commented.

"Exactly," Voldemort replied. "I'm glad to see your association with the fools at the Ministry has not robbed you of your intelligence. Now go and inform your son and the Weasley boy that they are to present themselves to me at the gathering in a week's time. Their actions have shown me that they will make fine Death Eaters, and their attendance at Hogwarts will provide a key source of information about the goings on there. 'Fox amongst the chickens', so to speak."

"I will see to it, my lord," Lucius stated. "Draco has informed me that young Ronald has been accepted back into the good graces of his family. Apparently, the situation involving your old journal and the youngest Weasley child provided him with a perfect alibi for his actions."

"That is good to hear," Voldemort said with a grin. "His position in a family openly supportive of Dumbledore will be useful in the times ahead."

- An ancient forest somewhere in England -

The morning following their meetings with Cernunnos and Brigid, found Harry and Hermione deep within the forest. Dari Àrmann had tasked them with spending the day practicing their growing skills in magic. At the moment, they were both deep in communion with the spirit of the forest itself.

Mione, it's amazing! Harry said in amazement over their bond. You can feel everything in the forest, from the smallest stone to the tallest tree.

I know, love, Hermione replied, it reminds me of what we share through our bond.

They spent the next hour or so exploring the forest in its entirety. Once they had finished practicing their Druidic communion, Harry and Hermione took a few moments to reorient themselves before

taking a break for lunch. As they were eating, the two of them chatted about what they had learned so far over the summer.

"It's staggering the amount of knowledge the druids have accumulated over the years," Harry stated.

"I know," Hermione agreed. "And not just magical knowledge, but Muggle knowledge as well. Professor Sinistra and Professor Vector would love to get their hands on the Astronomy and Arithmancy notes we've taken so far."

"That's the main problem with the Wizarding World, or at least here in Britain," Harry stated. "They chose to ignore any Muggle advances in science and such. They automatically assume that Muggles couldn't possibly be farther ahead in things than they are. Oh well, it's their loss."

As they continued talking, Dragwyddol, Dari Àrmann's runespoor familiar came up to them. Turning toward the runespoor when they heard him coming, both Harry and Hermione greeted him.

And a good afternoon to the two of you younglings, the three heads replied in unison. How are your studies coming?

They are coming along well, Dragwyddol, Hermione answered. We were taking a break from our studies for a bit to eat and talk.

And what is it that you talk about? asked the right head.

We were discussing the lives we left behind, when we decided to accept Dari Àrmann's offer, Harry replied. Accepting his offer was probably one of the best things we could have done.

Your companions, Hedwig and Crookshanks, mentioned as much earlier, the left head stated.

- The Burrow -

In the woods near the Weasley home, Fred and George had taken Ginny to their hiding place to discuss Ron's supposed change of heart. While they had acted like they had believed Ron's story, they didn't buy it for a second.

"How can you be sure that Ron is faking it?" Ginny said confused. "The whole situation is exactly like my first year at Hogwarts and Tom's diary."

"Which is exactly what Ron is counting on," George explained.

"He forgot a few crucial things," Fred said, "which shows he's full of it."

"Like what?" Ginny asked curiously.

"For one, using your situation as an example," George replied. "He never appeared more tired or sick than normal, and his appetite was as strong as ever."

"When you were being possessed by You-Know-Who," Fred continued, "you were always tired, and hardly ate, not to mention pale."

"Okay," Ginny stated after thinking about for a moment, "what you're saying makes sense, but why pretend to believe him. Why not tell mum and dad about it?"

"Because dad destroyed the journal Ron gave him," George answered with irritation. "We have no way to prove it to them."

"We also overheard the headmaster telling them You-Know-Who had returned," Fred added. "If that's true, then mum and dad won't hear anything that might split the family apart. Apparently, from the stories dad has told us, that happened to several families during the last war."

"So what do we do?" Ginny asked with a worried look on her face.

"Unfortunately," George answered, "all we can do is keep an eye on the prat, and make sure he doesn't do anything."

- An ancient forest somewhere in England -

The summer had gone by quickly for Harry and Hermione. During the three months they had spent at Dari Àrmann's cottage, they had learned about the philosophy of the Druids and their practices – both magical and mundane – the names of ancient gods of the Celtic

people and the rites and devotionals dedicated to them, and they had begun to learn the practical basics of Druidic Magic. While Harry and Hermione had very little free time during the summer, they were more sure than ever they had made the right decision when they accepted Dari Àrmann's offer. Not only did their new guardian, which Dari Àrmann had officially become a month into their training, as their life bond was still kept secret, teach them the ways of the druids, he encouraged them to continue their studies in subjects they had learned at Hogwarts, including their elemental abilities along with their growing proficiencies in Necromancy and Blood Magic. Dari Àrmann also instructed them in the art of Druidic Wards, which Harry and Hermione used to refine their Runic Fidelius Seal, and the use of various healing and diagnostic charms.

Along with their magical studies, Harry and Hermione continued to train physically. Along with daily runs and exercises, they continued their training in quarterstaves, and recently Dari Àrmann had begun to teach them both the art of the sword. Due to this training, and decent meals, neither Harry nor Hermione resembled their old selves. Harry had taken to growing his hair out longer and usually had it tied back. With his scar and glasses gone, along with the results of the Raggiungere Potion, he hardly resembled the scrawny Harry Potter which most people would recognize. Hermione's hair had lost its bushiness and had straightened out a bit. She usually had it pulled back in a tight braid which reached the middle of her back. Like Harry, Hermione had added muscle to her frame due to the physical training they had gone through, not only during the summer, but the last several months at Hogwarts.

During their time with Dari Àrmann, they had grown more confident and had made peace with their pasts and were no longer haunted by them. They came to accept their pasts helped to make them who they were, and had let go of their hatred for their former guardians. Dumbledore, on the other hand, would need to answer for what he had done. The their communion with their respective patron gods, Harry and Hermione came to the realization that Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore was the other Dark Lord mentioned in the prophecy given to Dari Àrmann by the Goddess Brigid.

Today they were packing up their belongings and traveling to London, where they would be taking their O.W.L.s. By taking their exams, Harry and Hermione would eliminate the option for Dumbledore to force them back to Hogwarts. They would eventually

take their N.E.W.T.s but, as they were not required by Ministry law, they would honor their oaths to the gods of their ancestors and finish their training as Druids. Both former Gryffindors had come to enjoy their lessons and were eager to learn more.

"Do you two have everything?" Dari Àrmann asked as he came into the main living area of the cottage.

"Yes, sir," Harry and Hermione said in unison. As they were Apparating to a secluded part of Muggle London, the three of them were dressed in Muggle clothing, so they would not attract attention. After sending Hedwig off with letters, along with the Marauders' Map, to the Weasleys stating neither of them would be returning to Hogwarts for reasons they would explain later and a warning not to trust Dumbledore. They also sent a letter to Neville explaining the same thing.

Arriving in an alley near downtown London, the three of them quickly hailed a cab. Giving the cab driver the destination of the Kensington West Hotel, where they would be staying for the next few weeks, Harry and Hermione's thoughts turned to the discussion they had with Dari Àrmann a week ago about taking their O.W.L.s early.

- FLASHBACK -

During dinner, one evening, Dari Àrmann brought up the issue of Harry and Hermione taking their O.W.L.s early to eliminate an option for Dumbledore to try and use to get Harry and Hermione back to Hogwarts.

"With your O.W.L.s taken, the old goat would have no legal way of forcing you back to Hogwarts at the start of the next term. Even though you are both considered adults, Dumbledore may try and push through a law geared toward your ages to get you back to Hogwarts. The laws regarding apprentices are written with specific ages listed, with no mention of adult or minor status, so that avenue is closed to us."

"Given what we've learned on our own during this last year, coupled with what Dari Àrmann has taught us," Harry said turning to Hermione, "I'm for it. What do you think, Mione?"

Nodding in agreement, Hermione turned to Dari Àrmann and asked how they would be able to take the exams without Dumbledore finding out about it. "Tomorrow, while the two of you are studying, I'll go to the Ministry of Magic and get everything arranged. Dumbledore will only be notified when you've completed the exams, and then only that you've taken them. He would only receive the results if you planned on attending next year."

Relieved to hear this, Harry and Hermione finished their dinner and went off to study their Druidic lessons before turning in for the night.

- END OF FLASHBACK -

Upon arriving at the hotel, Dari Àrmann paid the cab driver and the three of them made their way into the hotel to get settled in.

- Headmaster's Office at Hogwarts -

Albus Dumbledore was relaxing in his office glad to finally have resolved the issue of Harry and Hermione sending a letter to Amelia Bones, the Head of the DMLE. He had finally managed to assure her that everything was just a big misunderstanding. Admittedly he had to use a strong Compulsion Charm coupled with an Obliviate Charm on both Amelia and Minerva to resolve the matter, but Albus felt that in the long run it was best for the Greater Good that it be done.

Unfortunately this mess is going to rear up again in a couple of days when neither Potter or Drake show up for their fifth year at Hogwarts, Albus thought as he sucked on a lemon drop. When it does, I'll tell those who ask that Harry and Hermione have decided to take time off from formal education to help their families go into hiding and to train, given Riddle's return. Young Ronald's behavior toward them easily explains why he is at Hogwarts and not with them. The only minor issue with this is Mr Longbottom and the other three Weasleys. It's well known that both Potter and Drake consider them good friends. I'll have to take the four of them aside and explain that Potter asked me to let them know he needed them at Hogwarts to help not arouse too much suspicion. Backed by a Compulsion Charm, the issue should resolve itself. With everything that is going on, the last the last thing I need is for Tom to learn the truth about what happened to Potter and Drake.

As Albus was lost in his thoughts, Fawkes came to the conclusion that his old friend had left his former path and was not going to redeem himself anytime soon. With this in mind, the ancient phoenix flew out the office window and went in search of the two young fledglings that were giving his former companion so much trouble. Once he made sure that they were safe, Fawkes would return to the far away mountains where he was born.

- Kensington West Hotel, London -

Once Harry and Hermione had put away their things, Dari Àrmann motioned them to have a seat.

"In two days, you will both sit for your O.W.L.s," Dari Àrmann started. "This will not only block Dumbledore from trying to force the two of you to return to Hogwarts, but will give some 'official' legitimacy to your leaving Hogwarts."

"Thus keeping the Ministry, or others, off our backs," Hermione commented with an irritated look on her face.

"Bloody busybodies," Harry said sourly.

"A necessary evil for the most part, nowadays," Dari Àrmann stated. "Things were much simpler five centuries ago."

At this remark, both Harry and Hermione's jaws dropped in shock. "Exactly how old are you, sir?" Harry asked giving into his curiosity.

"Old enough to know better than to answer that particular question, Harry," Dari Àrmann replied with a smile. "But enough about that, I suggest the two of you relax the rest of the evening. Starting tomorrow, you'll need to study for the O.W.L. exams. After the exams are over, we can head to Diagon Alley and pick up a few things. Your exam results should arrive by the beginning of next week. With your O.W.L.s out of the way, Dumbledore will be forced to either abandon his plan of bringing you back under his control or try something else, which could ruin his reputation and influence if discovered.

"Dumbledore cares too much about his reputation and power base to risk it," Hermione stated.

Nodding in agreement, Harry took out his journal, in which he had been keeping his personal notes on Necromancy and ideas for its use, and began to read through them, every so often making a change here and there. He also began to add things he had recently discovered in his studies. Hermione, like Harry, busied herself with her study of Blood Magic.

- Hogwarts -

Back in the Gryffindor Common Room, Ginny, Neville, and the twins were discussing Harry and Hermione's absence.

"What do you think Harry and Hermione are up to?" Ginny asked the others.

"Knowing those two," Neville stated, "it could be anything. From the way they acted last year, the proverbial rulebook has been shredded and burned. The only thing I can be sure of is that Dumbledore is not going to like it."

"My dear brother and I have to agree with you," Fred said nodding his head. "We also don't buy Dumbledore's mutterings about how Harry and Hermione are away training. What ever those two are up to, Dumbledore had absolutely no say in the matter."

"From their letter," George continued, "it almost sounds like they've put our esteemed headmaster and Voldemort in the same category."

Sighing with relief, Ginny stated, "I'm glad I am not the only one who was thinking along those lines. The question is what we do about this."

"Keep an eye on things and figure out who we can trust to help," Neville stated.

"Agreed," the others said with determination.

With this decided on, the four Gryffindors put their heads together and began to work out the details. Fred and George were glad Harry had given them the Marauders' Map, as it would make tracking Ron and his new friends all the more easier.

- Ministry of Magic -

Cloaked in a Druidic glamour, Harry and Hermione followed Dari Àrmann to a rusty looking telephone booth. Entering the booth, which easily fit all three of them, Dari Àrmann took the phone and dialed 62442. After advising the receptionist they were there to take their O.W.L. exams, the magical lift quickly brought them to the Atrium, located on level 8 of the Ministry of Magic. As Harry and Hermione walked through the main lobby they looked around the large hall that made up the Atrium. Down both sides of the hall were gilded fireplaces which people seemed to be using to enter and leave the building. Looking up at the ceiling, the two of them saw an array of golden symbols flowing across a blue backdrop.

Passing the Fountain of Magical Brethren, they walked up to a set of golden gates which was guarded by a wizard wearing peacock blue robes.

"Please hand me your wands for registering," the man stated in a monotone voice.

Handing the watchwizard the three wands they had purchased in Knockturn Alley yesterday, the three of them waited patiently as they were scanned in by a device the watchwizard had taken from his robes. "These two are here to take their O.W.L exams," Dari Àrmann stated, "and we were wondering where to check in."

"Follow the hallway to my left," the watchwizard answered, "the examination room is five doors down on the right."

Thanking him for the information the three of them went through the gates and headed toward the examination room.

Chapter 13: The Truth Starts To Appear

- London -

It had been a week since Harry and Hermione had come to London with Dari Àrmann, and they were currently pacing the floor of their hotel room, anxiously awaiting the results of their exams. Dari Àrmann had given up telling them to relax, as he could see neither Harry nor Hermione would until the results had arrived. Fortunately, in the floor's opinion, their wait was over in a few minutes as they soon heard tapping at the window. Rushing over to it, they saw an owl with two rolls of parchment tied to its foot.

Letting the owl in and giving it a few treats, Harry and Hermione thanked the bird for the letters, before it nodded and flew off. Sitting down they each opened their letters and read the results.

Ordinary Wizarding Level Exam Results

for Hadrian James Potter

Each exam is broken up into a written and practical portion, where applicable, and the scores averaged into a final grade. The grade levels are as follows:

Passing Grades

O(Outstanding)

E(Exceeds Expectations)

A(Acceptable)

Failing Grades

P(Poor)

D(Dreadful)

T(Troll)

Course Practical Written Final Grade

Ancient Runes O O O

Astronomy E O E
CoMC O O O
Charms O O O
DADA O+ O O+
Herbology O O O
History of Magic NA E E
Potions O O O
Transfiguration O O O

The following results have been registered at the British Ministry of Magic and have been forwarded to the ICW Head office located in Geneva, Switzerland.

Ordinary Wizarding Level Exam Results

for Hermione Jean Drake

Each exam is broken up into a written and practical portion, where applicable, and the scores averaged into a final grade. The grade levels are as follows:

Passing Grades

O(Outstanding)

E(Exceeds Expectations)

A(Acceptable)

Failing Grades

P(Poor)

D(Dreadful)

T(Troll)

Course Practical Written Final Grade

Ancient Runes O O O
Arithmancy O O O
CoMC O O O
Charms O O O
DADA O+ O O+

Herbology O O O
History of Magic NA E E
Potions O O O
Transfiguration O O O

The following results have been registered at the British Ministry of Magic and have been forwarded to the ICW Head office located in Geneva, Switzerland.

Upon showing their results to Dari Àrmann, the druid smiled and congratulated both of them on doing exceptionally well on their exams.

With their O.W.L. results official and registered at the Ministry of Magic, Harry and Hermione both smiled at the thought of Dumbledore's reaction upon learning they were no longer bound by law to complete their formal education. Knowing Dumbledore would soon learn they had taken their O.W.L. exams, Harry and Hermione were anxious to return to Dari Àrmann's cottage. They both knew they weren't ready to deal with Dumbledore, and wanted to return to the safety of the forest and continue their Druidic training.

- Riddle Manor -

Voldemort was very pleased. He had received confirmation from Severus Snape that Potter had not returned to Hogwarts and Dumbledore was still unable to locate him. The boy has well and truly cut ties with Dumbledore, and may have Britain entirely. Severus also pointed out the Granger girl had disappeared as well. From what Draco has told me, I suspect the two of them are together, wherever that is. Dumbledore claims that he knows where they are, but from what all my sources tell me, the old coot is as much in dark as everyone else. While Dumbledore's deception may help our cause in the long run, at least knowing where the boy is, is imperative, so that we can keep tabs on his movements.

Voldemort summoned Lucius Malfoy, and upon his arrival instructed him to put any other projects on hold and to concentrate on locating Potter and Granger.

"And Lucius," Voldemort said as the head of the Malfoy Family was leaving the room. "All I want you to do is find them and nothing more. They are to be left alone, and simply watched. With their split from

Dumbledore, I don't want to give them any reason to consider rejoining the Muggle loving, old fool. As long as Dumbledore is focusing his energy into finding Potter and Granger, the less time he has to interfering with our plans."

"It will be as you command, my lord," Lucius Malfoy stated with a bow. "I will inform my contacts this is an observation detail only."

- Headmaster's Office at Hogwarts -

Albus Dumbledore realized he was at a loss as to where Harry Potter and Hermione Drake had disappeared to. He had exhausted all of his resources and contacts, and the only thing he could determine was the they were no longer in Great Britain, otherwise two teenagers, out on their own, would have certainly been found by now. He couldn't even rely on Fawkes is help in locating them, as the phoenix had yet to return.

Given his attitude toward me before he left, Albus thought, I can only assume that Fawkes has left for good. Why that phoenix can't see everything I've been doing is for the Greater Good of the Wizarding World, I don't know. What I do know, is without his presence, it will be harder to convince people I am still working for the cause of Light. I'm going to have to get the old group back together so we can start making plans to not only counteract Tom's plans, but to locate Potter and Drake, so they can be brought back into the fold.

Resigned to the fact that he will have to come clean of the fact that he had been deceiving people about Harry and Hermione's location, Albus could only hope that they would understand his reasons. I don't look forward to telling Minerva or Molly about this.

Later that evening, Albus was wishing he had been wrong about Minerva and Molly's reaction to his necessary deception. I'd ask Poppy for something to take away the ringing in my ears, but that would involve her finding out about the cause. Albus shuddered at what the healer would do to him at that point.

- 30 minutes previously -

After calming herself down, Minerva pointedly asked Albus what he had done to cause two of her more promising students to not only

state that they would not be returning to Hogwarts, but to send her their snapped wands as well.

"THEY DID WHAT!" Molly Weasley yelled as she pointed her wand at Dumbledore. "ALBUS DUMBLEDORE, YOU HAD BETTER START EXPLAINING AND IT HAD BETTER BE GOOD!" Ever since her three youngest sons had brought Harry to the Burrow, telling her about the bars on the boy's window, she had decided since those Muggle relatives were not going to raise him properly, then she would do what she could to counteract their neglect. Being a mother she could tell that something was wrong with both Harry and Hermione's home life from the way they acted around the Weasley family, Harry more so than Hermione. For the past two years she had looked upon them as her adopted children. As such, when she heard what they had done, due to something Dumbledore had done or said to them, Molly Anne Weasley née Prewett was going to get answers and she was going to get them now.

Gulping, Albus Dumbledore paled as he thought, I am a dead man. I'd forgotten Molly looked on those two like they were her own children. I'd better defuse this quickly. "Now Molly," Albus, recovering quickly, said in a grandfatherly tone. "There is no need to get excited. It's nothing more than a simple misunderstanding. I'm sure that once I have had a chance to sit down with Harry and Hermione, the three of us can get the matter settled quite easily."

"And what misunderstanding would that be, Albus?" Minerva said icily.

"It's merely a simple matter of finances I've been handling for them until they came of age," Dumbledore stated, knowing full well that anything other than the truth, or at least part of the truth, would not work with either Minerva or Molly at this point as their maternal instincts were operating in overdrive at the moment. His only hope was that they would be satisfied with general information, and not press him for details or what else he had done.

"Could these financial matters involve information that you chose to withhold from Harry and Hermione, even though by law you were required to inform them?" asked Minerva as she handed Molly a piece of folded parchment.

"I simply felt it was in their best interests for them to concentrate on their schooling and not have to worry about financial matters until they were older," Albus explained.

Molly, having finished reading the parchment which Minerva had given her, calmly folded the parchment and handed it back to the other woman. Turning to Dumbledore, Molly hauled off and backhanded him across the face. Then in a withering tone, she said, "Albus, for your sake, Harry and Hermione had bloody well better be safe where ever they are. If I find out that they are injured or in danger because of whatever meddling you've done, Azkaban will seem like a paradise compared to what I will do to you." With that she bid Minerva a polite good day and Flooed out of the office.

As Minerva turned to leave, she looked at Albus and said, "Given what I have learned from Harry and Hermione, I felt that it would be wise to make a copy of anything they send to me. Apparently, I was wise to do so, as the original letter seems to have vanished. I strongly suggest you seriously think about what your true intentions are, and whose side of this war, you claim is coming, you're on."

Slumping down in his chair, once his office door closed, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore decided that he couldn't remember a time when things had gone so terribly wrong. It was clear to him that all of his carefully laid plans had completely fallen apart with no way of salvaging them. To make matters worse, he had managed to alienate both Minerva, whose opinion held sway amongst the rest of the staff almost as much as his did, and the matriarch of the Weasley family, who would no doubt express her opinion and reasoning to the rest of her family.

On the plus side, more people will be trying to locate Potter and Drake, Albus thought as he sucked on a lemon drop.

- Ottery St. Catchpole, Devon: The Burrow -

It had been a week since Albus had confessed to the reactivated Order of the Phoenix that both Harry Potter and Hermione Granger had gone missing. This, coupled with the news of Voldemort's return, had resulted in quite an uproar at the meeting.

Arthur Weasley had managed to contact Remus Lupin after the meeting about Harry and Hermione's disappearance. Given his

years working in the Muggle world, due to his lycanthropy, Remus had gained quite a few contacts which he would be checking with to see if any information about Harry and Hermione's whereabouts could be found. Last night Remus had sent them a Patronus message stating he managed to track down some information. He was going to verify it and Floo them when he had concrete proof. This, of course, is what led to the current situation of his wife, Molly, pacing back and forth in middle of their living room.

"Now Mollywobbles," Arthur said trying to get his worried wife to calm down, "Remus said he would contact us as soon as he was able to verify what his contact had advised him of."

"I know that," Molly said in an irritated tone, "but I will not stop worrying until I hear that Harry and Hermione are safe. I want them back here with us, but even I can understand why they left. If any harm has come to them, I will personally show Albus Bloody Dumbledore exactly why even Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy have never made a disdainful comment about the Weasley Clan in my presence."

Arthur shuddered at this. Under normal circumstances, his wife was one of the kindest and gentlest people he knew. However, if someone threatened or harmed someone she considered family, especially if the person threatened or harmed was a child, then Merlin help the poor soul who crossed Molly Ann Weasley née Prewett. Given what he had heard about Dumbledore's meddling and its consequences, Arthur was more than happy to let his wife do what she felt was necessary. It was much safer for him, not to mention the fact that he would gladly help.

A few minutes later, their Floo flashed and Remus Lupin's head appeared in the flames. "Hey anyone there?"

Turning toward the fire, Molly told to Remus to come on through. Doing so, Remus appeared out of the fire and took a seat on one of the chairs in the room. After taking a sip from the glass of pumpkin juice which Arthur had offered, Remus stated he had managed to find some information on what had happened to Harry and Hermione.

"From what I've discovered," Remus started, "Harry and Hermione are still in Great Britain, but I can't discover where exactly those two

have hidden themselves. I've just left Gringotts and was able to confirm that not only do they now have the same guardian, their signatures were also on the form designating said wizard as such. Given the suspicious nature of the goblins, this tells me Harry and Hermione are not being controlled. The goblin in charge of Harry's accounts, advised me that the two of them left a letter for me explaining their actions as they didn't know where I was, and didn't trust owls not to be tracked."

Knowing that whatever was in the letter would not make its way back to Dumbledore, Remus opened the letter and read it aloud.

Moony,

By the time you read this letter, we will have gone into hiding, in a manner of speaking. While this is a temporary move, we do not know when we will return. We can sum up our reasons for this in two words: Dumbledore's meddling. We won't go into details about this, but suffice to say Voldemort is more honest about his intentions than the so-called Leader of Light. Knowing you, you have probably discovered that we have an unknown man listed as our guardian. This is true, and please reassure Mrs. Weasley that we are both safe, eating decently, and are not being controlled at all. The man who is "officially" listed as our magical guardian is firmly against Voldemort and his like. While he can't really be called a Light wizard, he can't be called a Dark wizard either. He has taught us more about the nature of magic this summer, than we ever learned at Hogwarts. As Mrs. Weasley will confirm, we sent our snapped wands to Minerva along with a letter stating our intentions of leaving Hogwarts. What we neglected to state in the letter, in case Dumbledore got his hands on it, was the fact that we can no longer use them. To be more specific, we are unable to use any form of wand. The reason for this is because we have retrained ourselves to use magic without the aid of a wand. All throughout this last school year, we learned the more skilled we became with this form of magic, the less usable our wands became.

Love,

Harry and Hermione (aka Shadow and Flame)

P.S. Yes Moony, it means exactly what you think it means.

P.P.S. Mrs. Weasley, we are both sorry we've made you worry, but this was the only way we could be sure we were free of Dumbledore's manipulations. We both promise to keep in touch and to stay safe.

Noticeably less agitated, Molly sank down into her chair and breathed a sigh of relief. "I don't like those two going off with someone I don't know, but the fact that they aren't defenseless is a relief to know. Their promise to keep in touch also helps; they're not completely cutting themselves off from us. Although I've half a mind to give them a good scolding for scaring me like that, when I do see them next."

"I've got a question and a theory, Remus," Arthur said. "First off, what did they mean by that ending, Remus?"

"My guess is that they have followed in the Marauders' footsteps and have become Animaguses," Remus replied. "Taking on another name which symbolizes your Animagus form is not uncommon from what I know of the practice."

"From what I remember of Harry's father, that makes a certain amount of sense," Arthur replied. "I suspect Harry would see it as a way to connect with James."

"From what I know of Harry," Molly added, "I believe you're right about his reasoning. Hermione going along with it eases my worries a bit, as I know Hermione would not do something that dangerous without making sure they had researched everything properly and had taken the proper precautions."

Nodding in agreement, Remus asked, "What was the theory you had mentioned, Arthur?"

"It was the way Harry and Hermione worded the part about their new magical guardian," Arthur replied. "They stated that he was 'officially' listed as their magical guardian."

"What's wrong with that," Molly asked with a puzzled look on her face. "They're still both minors, and by law need a magical guardian."

"If they were both still considered minors, you would be correct," Arthur agreed. "There are certain conditions, if met, would allow an

underage wizard or witch to be considered an adult, especially if Gringotts was involved."

Both Molly and Remus looked at each other with the same look on their faces, What did those two do now!

Hesitantly, Molly asked, "What are those conditions, Arthur?"

"I can think of two conditions off the top of my head which would be applicable. The first one is the little known law which states that if a person is the last remaining member of a Wizarding family, they would be considered an adult at fourteen, instead of the usual seventeen. This law would apply to Harry, as he is the last living Potter with magical abilities. It would not surprise me, if Harry and Hermione came across this law when they were looking for a way to allow Harry to get out of participating in the Tri-Wizard tournament."

"That would explain Harry not legally needing a guardian, but what about Hermione?" Molly asked.

"That is where the second condition, and the fact Gringotts seems to be involved in this, comes into effect," Arthur replied. "Hermione would be considered an adult if she were to marry. As she is fifteen, by Wizarding Law at least, she is considered old enough."

"Fifteen is much too young for a girl to be getting married," Molly argued. "I can't believe Harry and Hermione would rush into something like marriage this soon. Although I can see it happening after they graduate."

"That is where Gringotts comes in," Arthur answered as he stated that he agreed with Molly's assessment about marriage. "Gringotts would recognize Harry and Hermione as being married if a magical bond existed between the two of them. If such a bond existed, then Gringotts would acknowledge their union and allow any inheritances to be available, some of which would bestow adult status that the Ministry would have to recognize."

While Arthur was explaining this, Remus had a sudden suspicion about the letter, and tapped his wand to it, while whispering, "I solemnly swear, I am up to no good." The result caused Remus to fall out of his chair laughing and muttering about it being a prank worthy of The Marauders.

When Molly demanded to know what was so funny about the situation, Remus just handed Molly the letter and continued to laugh. "I don't see why this letter is any cause for such behavior, Remus Lupin," Molly stated as she glared at the man.

"Read the letter again, Molly," Remus managed to get out in between laughs. "Hermione had a hidden message written on the parchment as well."

Looking down at the letter again, Molly gasped when she saw that Remus was right, as another paragraph now appeared below the letter.

Congratulations on finding this message Remus. Now for some further information which the Ministry has access to, but we highly doubt are aware of.

Harry and I share a life bond with each other. Given our feelings for each other, this fact didn't surprise either of us. It only goes to demonstrate that magic itself approves of our feelings.

The formation and completion of this bond removed several blocks on our minds and magical cores. We suspect that Dumbledore had something to do with the blocks, but we don't have any proof.

The bond, according to Gringotts, made us eligible to take over as Heads of our family lines. Harry is now Lord Hadrian James Potter, and the Head of the Ancient and Noble House of Potter. I, myself, am Lady Hermione Jean Drake, and the Head of the Ancient and Noble House of Drake. My true heritage was concealed from me by Dumbledore himself, as Gringotts was able to verify - as Headmaster he would be aware of my true name and parentage. We also suspect he had something to do with my ending up in a Muggle orphanage, as my biological parents would have had a will stating who I should have gone to. This will is still missing, but is of no concern to me at this juncture.

Mrs. Weasley, as I am sure you are also reading this, rest easy in the fact both Harry and I are well aware of the fact we are still too young to be off on our own. While our former "guardians" didn't care enough about us to explain things, rest assured we paid attention to your and Mr. Weasley's lectures on appropriate behavior and the

like. You both showed us you cared about our well being, and we are not about to dismiss that fact.

Lastly, Harry and I will be returning, but not for a while yet. There are still things we need to do first. While we no longer trust Dumbledore, and could care less what the meddling old goat thinks of our leaving, both Harry and I realize we will be getting lectured by both you and Mr. Weasley when we get back.

Sincerely,

Hermione Drake (Harry is currently asleep as I add this to the letter)

Molly dropped into her chair, tears filling her eyes as the message they had left for her sunk in. When Arthur went to make sure Molly was okay, she showed him what Hermione had added. Smiling like the proud father he was, Arthur was glad to see Harry and Hermione took what they had tried to teach them to heart. I see those two kids as my own and I'm relieved to see they are safe. Once he finished reading the message from Hermione, Arthur made the comment, "This explains the charges I overheard Amelia Bones planning on leveling against Albus. I suspect Harry and Hermione sent her a similar letter."

With that, Remus bid them goodbye and headed out via their Floo. Molly sat down to write a letter to her two "adopted" children. She hoped that Gringotts might have a way of getting it to them.

- Hogwarts: Severus Snape's office -

Severus Snape, sitting behind his office desk, looked on at the four students in front of him: Draco Malfoy, Theodore Nott, Daphne Greengrass, and Ronald Weasley. These four 5th year students had proven themselves ready to start learning the intricacies behind learning the darker aspects of magic. While they were not, in his opinion, ready to cast the Unforgivables, Snape felt they had the mindset to learn more advanced curses. While not true black magic, some of the curses he planned on teaching them were potent in their own right. The art of true black magic would be only taught by the Dark Lord himself. Snape inwardly shuddered at the cost of some of the black spells he had learned under the Dark Lord's tutelage.

"The four of you are here because I have decided you, out of all your year-mates, have earned the right to begin learning more advanced magic," Severus Snape began. "The skills I will be teaching you, will better prepare you for inclusion into the ranks of the Dark Lord's soldiers. Over the course of this school year, I will be instructing you all in various curses, hexes, and potions. In addition to this, I will be teaching you the art of Apparation. While this is not normally taught until your sixth year, I feel this skill will prove too useful for you to ignore until next year, when you can 'officially' be instructed. Now before we begin, I have asked each of you to come up with an additional topic you would like to focus your studies on. Miss Greengrass, let's begin with you."

"I am interested in learning more about Enchantments, sir," Daphne replied. "My grandmother was an Enchantress prior to her death, and according to my grandfather I show the same strengths and interests in magic she did at my age."

"A very respectable field, Miss Greengrass," Snape stated. "Lady Malfoy is an Enchantress of some note. I'll contact her in regards to appropriate books for you to study from. I'm sure she would also consent to tutor you in the art over the holidays and next summer. Mr. Malfoy, I assume that you are still interested in Alchemy?"

"That is correct, sir," Draco replied.

"A tricky field of study," Snape commented. "I know of a like-minded alchemist who may consent to instruct you in the art. I will contact her and get back to you. Mr. Nott, what field have you chosen?"

"Professor McGonagall told me I have a talent for Transfiguration, so I would like to advance my knowledge of the field, sir," Theo answered after some thought.

"If Minerva stated you have a talent in Transfiguration, then I agree you should delve deeper into the field," Snape stated. "I shall provide you with some tomes that will aid you in your studies. When the Dark Lord releases her from Azkaban, I will see if Bellatrix will consent to pass on her considerable knowledge on the subject. Until then, I'll also arrange for you to have access to the Restricted Section of the library in regards to tomes on Transfiguration."

Finally turning to Ronald Weasley, Snape asked, "And finally, the sole Gryffindor to see the true path. What are you looking to learn more about, Mr. Weasley?"

"Sir, I would like to follow the path of my great uncle," Ron replied.

"Given your growing skill in Potions," Snape replied with a chuckle, "I am sure you will do Artus Weasley proud. I took the liberty of looking up some information about him and some of the papers he wrote on the art of potion making. If you would like I can provide you with a copy of them. Some of the man's theories were a bit strange, but is often the case when it comes to breaking new ground in potions. As for the field of Potions itself, I will teach you the subtle art myself. You have proven to me, you have the skills and mindset necessary to succeed in the field."

"I would like that, sir," Ron replied. "And thank you for allowing me to learn more from you." A chance to not only get to know more about my great uncle, but to learn more from Professor Snape. I was right to reveal my true nature to Draco, as it showed me what I can accomplish by getting out from underneath my family's mistaken beliefs.

Upon making some quick notes in regards to contacting people in about his charges' chosen specializations, Snape motioned for the four students to follow him. After a few minutes of walking deeper into the dungeons, Snape led them to what appeared to be a blank wall. Severus placed his right hand on the wall and whispered something in a language that none of the others recognized. Suddenly an archway appeared in the wall.

Chapter 14: Answers, Arrests, Allegiance Shifts

- Hog's Head Pub -

Aberforth Dumbledore was annoyed with his older brother Albus. While most who knew the brothers would not find this odd, as the Dumbledore brothers had had a strained relationship since their younger sister, Ariana, had died, they would be hesitant to believe the current reason for his annoyance.

Blast that overconfident, arrogant brother of mine, Aberforth thought as he tended the bar. He has to have these elaborate schemes going to further his delusional goals to restore the Dumbledore wealth. Because he planned all of his schemes around his control over the Potter boy, they are all worthless, now that Potter has broken free of him. To top it all off, not only is the Drake girl with him, but they've gone into hiding. Albus suspects they are aware of the Potter and Drake vault, along with the tomes that were stored there. If that's true, and it probably is, they could be anywhere given those resources. From what I've learned about those two, it wouldn't surprise me if they discover the blocks Albus placed on them, when he took them from their homes all those years ago. Given what Albus has done to those two, I can only hope they don't find me guilty by virtue of my last name. Thomas Riddle is problem enough to deal with, without adding a pissed off Harry Potter and Hermione Drake into the mess. I told Albus he should have dealt with Riddle when he was still a student at Hogwarts, but the fool insisted the boy was too useful to be gotten rid of.

As Aberforth was filling a patron's mug with more ale, Dedalus Diggle walked into the tavern and headed over to the bar. "Hello Diggle," Aberforth said. "What can I get for you?"

"I've got some information that needs to get to Albus," Dedalus replied quietly as he surreptitiously passed an envelope over to Aberforth. Taking the envelope, Aberforth thought, I hope this is good news, as we've had enough bad news to last several lifetimes. Nodding slightly to the wizard, Aberforth poured Dedalus Diggle a glass of firewhiskey.

A few minutes after Diggle had left, so not to arouse suspicions, Aberforth told Elise, a squib who worked at the tavern, to watch the place for a few minutes as he had to finish up some business in his

office. After putting up privacy and silencing wards, Aberforth opened up the envelope to find a piece of parchment and a vial containing a silvery substance.

Slipping the vial, of what Aberforth figured to be a memory, into his pocket, Aberforth unfolded the parchment and began to read the information that Diggle had passed onto him.

Albus,

When you informed us at the last meeting that Mr. Potter and Miss Granger had disappeared from their Muggle relatives, I began contacting several people I know in the Muggle World, who might have seen or heard something which could help us track down where the two children could have been taken. Yesterday evening, I received a call from one of my contacts with information about Harry and Hermione's location. From what I was able to learn, Harry and Hermione are still somewhere in Britain as there have been no signs of them going through customs either Muggle or Magical. Disguises were obviously checked for. I have also managed to learn that they both have the same guardian. He is listed as such by both the Ministry and the Muggle authorities. All legal aspects of this have been covered, so no loopholes could be located. I enclosed a copy of the memory I extracted from the Ministry worker who saw them. I removed any memory of our conversation from the witch when I went to see her, so nothing can be traced back to us. I hope this helps, and I will continue to see what I can track down.

Relieved to finally have some good news in this whole mess, Aberforth called on the sole remaining house elf bound to the Dumbledore family.

"What is Master Dumbledore needing from Dippy?" the house elf replied moments after popping into Aberforth's office.

"Go to Hogwarts, and inform Albus that I need to speak with him urgently and in person. He also needs to bring the Dumbledore Family Pensieve as well." Aberforth replied.

As the house elf popped out to deliver the message, Aberforth went back out into the tavern to wait for his brother to arrive. I hope this plan of Amelia's works, Aberforth thought as he took over for Elise.

- Hogwarts -

Upon locking and securing the room from eavesdroppers, Severus Snape motioned for the four students to take a seat at one of the tables. "Every Wednesday evening," he began, "for the rest of this year, I will expect you to show up in this classroom at 8pm sharp. I have keyed you all into the archway so it will allow you entrance. Between 8 and 10pm, I will be instructing you in advanced magical arts, and I expect all of you to pay attention. This is serious business and I will not tolerate foolishness of any kind, as messing around with what I plan on teaching you is tantamount to suicide. To begin, I will be instructing you in Occlumency, or the art of shielding your mind. I am aware you all know at least some measure of this art, but I intend to help you improve and refine your skill in this ability."

The Slytherin students looked at Ron in amazement, wondering where Ron would have learned Occlumency. Chuckling, Draco turned to Ron and asked, "Your great uncle's journal?"

Ron nodded in answer. "Not to be rude," Theo asked, "but who is this great uncle that keeps getting mentioned?"

"Mr. Weasley's Great Uncle Artus Weasley was a high ranking and powerful member of the Knights of Walpurgis," explained Snape. "He, and other high ranking members, were imprisoned at Nurmengard along with Gellert Grindelwald at the end of World War II. Some of the poisons I will be teaching you were developed and refined by him."

"Sir, why is it that nobody every talks about the Knights of Walpurgis?" Daphne asked. "The only thing I've ever been told, or read, is they were a group of wizards and witches who followed Grindelwald during World War II. The Wizarding public knows more about the Death Eaters, than simply that they are the loyal followers of Voldemort."

"Most people who remember those times," Snape explained, "don't like to talk about it. When Grindelwald was defeated and he and his followers were imprisoned, the Wizarding World simply wanted to forget about it all and start rebuilding their lives. The fact that nothing was written down or passed on about the Knights of Walpurgis, was a deliberate act done to try and erase the memory of what they did. Most families erased any knowledge of family members who

belonged to the order. The Weasley family, from what Ron has stated, only retained Artus Weasley's name in their family history along with the simple fact he had disgraced the family in some way."

"What about the families that supported Grindelwald's cause?" Theo asked. "Wouldn't they want to pass on the truth to future generations?"

"Those families that fully supported Grindelwald," answered Snape, "left Britain, shortly after his defeat, in order to avoid the purge which followed."

As there were no further questions, Snape began to test their Occlumency shields and then proceeded to instruct them on methods to improve them. This went on until 10pm when Snape ended the lesson. Pulling Ron aside, Severus informed him that he had cleared the lessons with Professor McGonagall, leading her to believe that they were remedial Potions lessons.

"Thank you, sir," Ron replied. "I wasn't sure how I was going to explain it to Professor McGonagall and still be seen as the thickheaded Gryffindor which I am known for being."

"Given Gryffindor students' normal attitude toward the Slytherin House and myself," Snape commented, "I can understand why it would be difficult to come up with a believable reason on your own. With the reason coming directly from me, it is not only believable, but it shows my willingness to help students outside of Slytherin."

Heading back to Gryffindor Tower, Ron thought, This year looks to be one of the best ones yet.

- Hog's Head Pub -

Shortly after Aberforth started serving dinner to the few local patrons who had stopped by, Albus entered the tavern and came over to the bar, where Aberforth was working.

"Elise," Aberforth called out. "Watch the bar for a bit." Motioning for Albus to follow him, Aberforth headed back to his office. Upon closing the door, Albus proceeded to setup privacy wards to insure their conversation and actions would be kept secret. Taking the

Dumbledore Family Pensieve out of his robes, Albus restored it to its proper size and placed it on the desk in front of him.

"Dippy stated it was urgent, Aberforth," Albus said. "I assume it's about Potter and Drake."

"It is," Aberforth replied as he handed Albus the letter. While Albus read the letter, Aberforth took out the memory Dedalus Diggle had gotten for them, and placed it into the Pensieve.

"It's a start," Albus stated as he refolded the parchment and placed in his pocket. "Hopefully the memory will give us a clue as to who this other person with Potter and Drake are."

A few minutes late, Albus and Aberforth exited the memory and Albus began to curse heavily. "I take it, brother, you know who the other person is?" Aberforth asked.

"Oh yes," Albus said as he collapsed into a chair. "I met him during the campaign against Grindelwald. His name is Dari Àrmann, and if he's placed Potter and Drake under his protection then they are truly beyond my reach."

"He's that powerful?" Aberforth asked, not liking where this conversation was headed.

"Here's what I know about him," Albus stated as he pinched the bridge of his nose. "He has no need for a wand to use magic. While he is not a Dark Wizard, he can't be called a Light Wizard by any stretch of the definition. I've seen him Apparate through wards that should have prevented the act. He is also an All-Speaker and a Beast-Speaker. Finally, the man bloody well hasn't aged since I last saw him in 1945!"

Gulping, as he definitely did not like the sounds of this, Aberforth asked, "Okay, not a man to have as an enemy. As I am assuming you were on the same side, wouldn't he be willing to at least hear you out?"

"Given the fact that he is well aware of my various manipulations during that war," Albus confessed, "I highly doubt he would trust anything I say. He has no respect for the Ministry of Magic, and the last time Aurors were sent to stop him from practicing his art around

Muggles, they returned empty handed and two of them actually handed in their badges stating they couldn't, in good conscious, work for the Ministry any longer."

"If he's breaking the Statute of Secrecy," Aberforth pointed out, "wouldn't the ICW get involved?"

"As he is shrouding his abilities with religion," Albus answered, "the Statute technically hasn't been broken."

Puzzled by his brother's answer, Aberforth was about to ask what he meant by that when he paled as he remembered something from the pensive memory. Those markings on the man's neck were not tattoos! How is that possible, it's said Caesar's sorcerers made sure to eradicate all traces of the Druidic Order from the country. "So oh brilliant brother of mine, what are you going to do, now that all of your plans are shot?" Aberforth said in a sarcastic tone.

"Don't worry Aberforth," Albus stated in a condescending voice, "Tom Riddle still believes in the prophecy I planted. As soon as he discovers where Potter and Drake disappeared to, he'll send someone to bring Potter back. With Death Eaters after him, the boy will realize the only place safe is back at Hogwarts under my protection."

"Stupefy," Aberforth replied as he pointed his wand at Albus. Upon stripping his brother of his wand and emergency Portkey, Aberforth tied Albus up and placed a recording of their conversation into a bag around Albus's neck. He then placed a voice-activated Portkey on his brother.

"Activate," Aberforth said as he watched his brother vanish. The Ministry is welcome to the old goat. Blast that idiot brother of mine. All I want is to be left in peace and run my tavern. At this point, I could care less who is running things, as long as they leave me and my tavern alone.

- Gringotts -

Shortly before closing time, Molly Weasley walked into the lobby of Gringotts praying that the goblins would help her. Walking up to the first available teller, she politely asked if it would be possible for her to speak with the goblin in charge of the Potter accounts.

"Who are you, and why would the Potter Accounts Manager want to speak with you?" replied the teller with a sneer.

"My name is Molly Weasley," Molly answered, "I'm trying to get a letter to someone I consider my son, and the Potter Account Manager may be the only one who can get the letter to him."

"Please place your hand on the plate in front of you, to verify your identity," the goblin stated.

Upon receiving the results from the identity scan, the goblin told Molly to have a seat and he would see if the Potter Account Manager would speak with her.

Thanking the goblin for his assistance, Molly went back to where there were chairs set aside for people waiting to be helped. Several minutes later, a goblin came up to Molly and stated, "Follow me - Account Manager Griphook will see you."

Molly got up and followed the goblin down a corridor and to an office with a nameplate reading 'Account Manager Griphook'. After announcing her to Griphook, the goblin returned to the main lobby of the bank.

"Have a seat Mrs. Weasley," Griphook stated. "I am going to come straight to the point. Lord Potter and Lady Drake are in a position where they trust very few people. While they feel they can trust you, I am hesitant to at this time."

"Account Manager Griphook, given what has happened recently, I understand your reluctance to trust me," Molly replied with a short bow before sitting as her son Bill had told her. "Will you allow me to swear a magical oath to prove my intentions?"

It appears her stripling has taught her about goblin etiquette, Griphook thought as he nodded his acceptance. I'll have to mention this to his supervisor. Sliplock will be pleased to hear his apprentice has taken his lessons to heart. Molly took out her wand and placing it over her heart stated, "I, Molly Anne Weasley née Prewett, swear on my magic and my life I think of Harry and Hermione as my own children and will not knowingly betray the trust they have in me." Upon swearing her oath, Molly was surrounded by a blue glow as

her own magic judged her. "On a side note," Molly added. "Albus Dumbledore has broken faith with my family for what he has done. While my husband and I remain in the service of Light, neither of us will follow his leadership. What he has done is unforgivable as far as we are concerned."

"Mrs. Weasley," Griphook replied with a toothy grin. "If you give me the letter you have written, I will see to it that it is delivered."

"Thank you Account Manager Griphook," Molly stated as she handed over the letter. With another short bow Molly excused herself from Griphook's office and returned to the Burrow.

- Ministry Holding Cell -

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore could not remember when he had been in a more precarious position, than the one he was in now. Upon waking up from his brother's stunner, Albus had found himself in a Ministry Holding cell. After searching his person, he discovered both his spare wand and his emergency portkey were missing. He was distraught to learn that he was also wearing magic suppression bracelets. I still can not believe Aberforth has turned against me. Can't he see my plans are not only for restoration the Dumbledore family wealth and power, but for the greater good of the Wizarding World? With as powerful as Potter and Drake have the potential to be, I can't risk the chance they will choose a side other than being under my command. With Dari Ármann now in the picture, all of my plans will have to be scrapped. I'll have to assume the blocks I placed on Potter and Drake are no longer there, and plan accordingly. They must be found and brought back under my control, otherwise they will continue to be a threat to my power. I haven't spent all these years convincing the public of my image as a Leader of Light who has the best interests of the Wizarding World in mind, to have it shredded by two ungrateful teenagers who haven't even finished their schooling yet.

A few minutes later, Amelia Bones and Kingsley Shacklebolt entered the holding cell. While Shacklebolt looked concerned as to why Albus Dumbledore of all people was in a Ministry holding cell, Amelia Bones was making no effort to hide her anger.

"Alright Albus," Amelia stated. "Consider yourself under arrest for gross negligence in regards to a Wizarding minor and associating with a known terrorist organization."

"Now, Amelia," Albus said in a grandfatherly tone, "I'm sure this is all simple misunderstanding, and we can resolve this like reasonable adults."

"What you can do," Amelia replied, "is answer a few questions under Veritaserum."

"I'm certain that won't be necessary," Albus said in a scolding tone. "My word is good enough to answer a few questions."

"Not a chance," Amelia argued. "I'm making sure this is done by the book with no chance of you reputing later on."

With a quick jab of her wand, Amelia Bones immobilized Dumbledore and had Shacklebolt administer the three drops of Veritaserum.

"Now Albus what did Harry Potter and Hermione Granger mean when they stated you had withheld financial and family information from them?"

"Stupefy!"

Amelia Bones, not expecting an attack from one of her Aurors, fell to the ground unconscious.

Kingsley Shacklebolt, after checking Amelia life signs, removed the magical suppression bracelets from Albus Dumbledore and gave him the antidote for the Veritaserum. "Your lucky I was the Auror who was assigned to your case, sir."

"Felix Felicis is truly a useful potion to have on hand," Albus replied. "I knew giving you my mark was a wise choice, my friend. We must hurry, as Amelia, given her magical ability, will soon wake from your stunner."

After hitting Amelia Bones with a strong Confundus Charm and a Memory Charm, Albus and Shacklebolt left the detention block and managed to leave the Ministry without being seen.

Several hours later, as Dumbledore waited in his office for the members of the Order of the Phoenix to arrive, his thoughts turned toward his brother, I still can't believe Aberforth has turned against me. Can't he see my plans are not only for restoration the Dumbledore Family's wealth and power, but for the Greater Good of the Wizarding World? With as powerful as Potter and Drake have the potential to be, I can't risk the chance they will follow someone other than me. With Dari Àrmann now in the picture, all of my plans will have to be scrapped. I'll have to assume the blocks I placed on Potter and Drake are no longer there, and plan accordingly. They must be found and brought back under my control, if the Wizarding World is to survive the dark times which are coming, not to mention the resources that will be outside my control.

When the Order members had all arrived, Albus opened up the meeting by asking Snape for any information about Voldemort's actions of late.

"His order of refraining from attacks is still in force," Severus Snape began. "With the Wizarding World still clueless about his return, the Dark Lord is biding his time and rebuilding his forces. With his magical core and spirit completing the merging process with his new body, Voldemort has regained his former strength and power. Other than continuing the search for Potter, he has Lucius Malfoy and Theodore Nott, Sr. working on something involving the Ministry. I suspect it has to do with breaking out his followers from Azkaban."

"Do you know where he is on locating Harry?" Dumbledore asked.

"Only that Granger is more than likely with him," Severus replied. "I'll give the brats this much," he added after a moment, "the fact that they have managed to avoid being seen in the obvious places such as Diagon Alley or London in general, tells me they've planned this out, and are not making things up as they go."

"I'm sorry Severus," Minerva McGonagall asked in a shocked tone. "Did I just hear you actually give two Gryffindors a compliment? Not to mention one of them having the last name of Potter."

Sighing, Severus stated, "Given their attitudes and respective actions over this last school year, not to mention both he and Granger have managed to avoid being found by either the Order or

Voldemort's agents all summer and even now, even I have to admit underestimating them. It appears they are not the foolish children I thought them to be." The fact that the Dark Lord has strict orders for them to be taken alive and unharmed tells me Voldemort may be rethinking the idea of killing Potter, the Potion Master thought to himself.

"Thank you, Severus," Minerva replied with a smile. "I'm glad to see you are growing up."

"In regards to Harry and Hermione's whereabouts," Albus stated hoping to cut off any potential arguing between Minerva and Severus, "due to Dedalus Diggle's efforts, we now know for certain Harry and Hermione are still in Britain. What we need to determine now, is where specifically they have gone to. Once we have located them, we will need to arrange for their transportation back to Hogwarts"

"And how do you propose to accomplish that?" Kingsley Shacklebolt asked. "First we'd have to locate them, which will be next to impossible given the fact that they could be anywhere, especially since they're both knowledgeable of the Muggle World. Secondly, my contacts at the Ministry were able to learn that they have already taken their O.W.L.s. Given this fact, they are no longer required to attend Hogwarts."

"Given all of your meddling, I'm not surprised they took steps to avoid having to return to Hogwarts," Arthur Weasley stated. "By the way, Molly wanted you to know that she resigns from the order, given she can no longer trust you. This will be my last meeting as well. I'm only here because I felt it would be safer than Molly coming to inform you of our resignation."

"I'm sorry to see you leave," Albus said. "The Light will be all the less without you." Sowing the seed of guilt will bring them back. If word gets out that the Weasley's no longer side with me, than others may start to question their own loyalties to me. This day is going from bad to worse.

Arthur could help but laugh at Albus's comment. "Albus, you meddling old goat," Arthur chuckled. "The Weasley Family will always follow the Light. We are simply choosing not to follow you." With that, Arthur bid his goodbyes and left.

"Okay Albus," Alastor Moody barked out, "what in Merlin's name just happened? More specifically, what did you do to cause the Weasleys of all people of all people to distrust you?"

"It's nothing more than a simple misunderstanding," Albus lied. "I made some decisions regarding young Mr. Potter and Miss Granger, which they feel were inappropriate. I am quite certain once they have time to calm down and think about it rationally, Arthur and Molly will agree that I was right in my decisions."

That's your side of the story, the retired Auror thought to himself. I'll hold off on forming my own opinion until after I have a talk with Arthur and Molly. Outwardly, Moody simply nodded in agreement with Dumbledore.

AN: Well that is the last of the rewritten chapters. Moving forward will be new chapters. Sorry about the long wait, but computer malfunctions and hospital stays tend to slow things down. The main reason for the rewrite, besides fixing some errors in early chapters, was to remove Pandregalus Keep from the story line. I've realized that I still need to do some work on it to be a viable place to write about. It will more than likely reappear in a future story.

Chapter 15: A Return, An Escape, And A Secret Revealed

- Dari Àrmann's Cottage -

Back at the cottage, Harry and Hermione quickly settled back into their normal routine. While they spent the mornings learning about druidic practices and philosophy, They spent their afternoons studying their own areas of interest. Harry had advanced in the area of Necromancy to the point where he could summon and bind a variety of spirits, ghosts, and poltergeists. During his studies, Harry had also learned the art of entering into pacts with various spirits and had gained a few allies in the spirit world. Currently, he was delving into the creation of Inferi. This was a more advanced form of what he did in the graveyard, during Voldemort's rebirth. Where those zombies were utterly mindless and would have only lasted an hour at the most, Inferi had a modicum of intelligence and would last until they were released. When Hermione asked about his reasoning for this, Harry explained that in order to know how to release the animating spirit from its entombment, he first needed to learn how it was imprisoned in the first place. For her part, Hermione had continued to immerse herself in the study of Blood Magic. She was now proficient in all manners of blood wards, various rituals, and the uses of blood in various ways to key potions to a specific person. Her current topic of study was the art of blood runes. The ancient Norse wizards, or spae-workers as they were called, had developed a method of carving runes directly onto the body to produce a temporary or even permanent effect. Immediately recognizing the various uses they could provide, Hermione was determined to understand and master this art.

A couple of weeks after their return, they received a letter from Mrs. Weasley. Opening it, Hermione read it aloud:

Harry and Hermione,

Remus showed us the letter which you had left for him at Gringotts and I am relieved to know the two of you are safe and doing well. The resulting confrontation with Albus about what had happened, has lead our family from breaking away from him. While I'm not happy with the two of you for running off without telling anyone, I do understand your reasons for doing so. I am glad to hear that at least two of my children have the good sense to realize that they can't handle everything on their own. Both William and Charles struck out

on their own shortly after leaving Hogwarts, and soon realized they still needed help from Arthur and I. You two at least realized this fact beforehand. I'm still not comfortable about you being with someone I've never met, but this is the mother in me, and am not likely to change my opinion until I've met this person and can verify for myself what his intentions are.

There has also been a development with Ronald. Shortly after returning home for the summer, Ron revealed that he had been under the influence of Arthur's uncle Artus Weasley. He was a powerful wizard who followed Gellert Grindelwald, the dark lord defeated by Dumbledore during World War II. From what I understand it was similar to the diary that Ginny dealt with three years ago. After a few days of rest, he was back to his old self again. While he is still associating with Slytherins, according to George, Fred, and Ginevra, his attitude and behavior is acceptable.

On another note, we have a new addition to the Weasley family. Ginevra had written about seeing Mr. Crouch's old house elf, Winky, as Hogwarts earlier in the school term. Apparently she had been pining away and consuming a lot of butterbeer. As butterbeer is the house elf equivalent of firewhiskey, you can guess the state that she was in most of the time. After talking with Winky, Ginevra learned that she wanted to serve a family again, but being banished by Mr. Crouch, she felt that she was a bad elf and no one would want her. After talking it over with Arthur, we decided to take the poor dear into the Weasley family. While there isn't much for her to do around the house, with it just being Arthur and I, she seems quite content with what there is to do around the Burrow. I can safely say that Winky has gotten her confidence back, as yesterday she scolded Arthur for tracking mud into the house after tinkering in his shed. Between Winky and I, the daily chores don't take long at all to do, and we spend the rest of the day puttering around the garden and doing odd projects that I've been wanting to do, but haven't gotten around to them.

As it is nearing the time to get supper ready, I will end this letter here. Please write soon, and know you both will always have a home here with us.

Love,

Molly Weasley.

"I'm glad to hear that Dumbledore has lost his hold on them," Harry stated, knowing that Gringotts would have never forwarded the letter on without checking into things. "I'm a little hesitant in buying Ron's turn around though. Something doesn't seem right with his story."

"From what I remember about how Ginny acted, Ron's behavior doesn't match," Hermione stated after thinking about it for a moment.

"That's right!" Harry exclaimed. "She was always tired and had memory lapses from time to time. If anything, Ron was more energetic than ever. I'm willing to bet he's using what happened to Ginny as a cover so he can get back into the good graces of his family."

"That's sounds like a real possibility," Hermione agreed. "We'll have to write to Ginny and the twins to get their opinions. Speaking of which, what's your opinion about asking Dari Àrmann, when he returns from Glastonbury, about taking a short visit to the Weasley's in a couple of weeks?"

"Sounds like a plan to me, love," Harry replied. "It would give Mrs. Weasley a chance to see that we are safe and healthy. We could also show her our O.W.L. results."

"That's a good idea!" Hermione exclaimed. "It would show her that we are still taking our education seriously."

"It will also give her a chance to give us that scolding you know she's been planning since she found out we left," Harry said with a chuckle.

Hermione nodded in agreement. "It'll be good to see Mr. and Mrs. Weasley again. They've been more of a mother and father to me than the Grangers ever were."

"I know what you mean," Harry stated as he thought about growing up at the Dursleys'.

With that, the couple decided to take a swim in the pond near the cottage before retiring for the evening.

The next morning, they awoke to the smell of bacon and eggs cooking in the kitchen. Upon entering the kitchen, Harry and Hermione saw Dobby busily cooking away. Turning to see Harry and Hermione entering the kitchen, Dobby rushed up to them, and after hugging their legs, said, "Dobby being glad he has finally located Master Harry and Mistress Hermione. Dobby be having to talk with Qin at Hogwarts to be learning how to use family bond to locate through wards. Never learning how at old masters place, so be taking time to learn. Qin be glad that Dobby serving proper family again."

"It's good to see you Dobby," Hermione said bending down to give the house elf a hug. "Harry and I have been so busy these past few months; things are just now starting to settle down a bit."

"Yeah Dobby," Harry stated as he also gave Dobby a hug, "it's good to see you again. How were things at Hogwarts?"

"Master and mistress's friends be watching bad Weasley, as they not be trusting him. Bad Weasley be hanging around old master and his friends. Professor Snape is teaching them something behind bad wards that be blocking house elves from seeing. Dobby be telling Laughing Wheezes about what he be seeing before Dobby leaving Hogwarts to find master and mistress."

"Sounds like the others don't buy Ron's story either," Hermione commented as she sat down to eat breakfast.

Glad to hear that someone was keeping an eye on Ron and his new friends, Harry and Hermione caught Dobby up on what they had been learning his summer, or at least in general terms. Finishing up breakfast, and being kicked out of the kitchen so Dobby could clean, Harry and Hermione went into the woods to work on their druidic lessons. Today they were going to delve more into their ability to commune with Nature itself. When they reached the clearing which they often used, they seated themselves comfortably on the ground and were soon in a Druidic Trance which Dari Àrmann had taught them. Letting their minds relax and connect with the forest surrounding them, Harry and Hermione soon found their awareness expanding outward.

I'm still awed at this connection we have with Nature, Mione, Harry said through their bond.

I know, love, Hermione replied. It's like we're truly part of the forest itself. I can understand why the druids were so defensive of the lands under their protection.

I agree, Harry stated. It was said that they willingly gave their lives protecting the land from harm. After experience this feeling, I understand why.

With this said, the two sent their minds outward to explore the forest and discover what all lay within its boundaries. As they flitted through the trees and brush, Harry and Hermione introduced themselves to the beings that they met. While some were aware of their presence in forest, either through others of their kind, or from Dari Armann, they all were glad to see the line of Druids was not at an end. Around noon, Harry and Hermione returned to the cottage to get a bite to eat and rest a bit before returning to their general studies, as they both were determined not to neglect their general studies they had started at Hogwarts.

- Riddle Manor -

Tom Riddle, now known as Lord Voldemort, was puzzled. Even with all of his resources, both magical and mundane, he was unable to locate either Harry Potter or Hermione Granger. The only thing of which he was certain was the fact that they were still in Britain somewhere. I must say, Voldemort said to his familiar and closest friend, Nagini, my respect for those two has gone up. To not only be able to hide from me and my followers, but to stay hidden from Dumbledore and his people, is most impressive. According to Severus, they not only have broken from Dumbledore, but he recently discovered that they sent their snapped wands to McGonagall. If it weren't for the fact that Potter summoned those skeletons during my rebirth I'd think that they had left the Wizarding World for good. Given the power and knowledge it takes to perform even that simple bit of Necromancy leads me to believe that at least Potter is capable of Wandless Magic. Although from what I have learned of Granger, I suspect she is just as capable.

From what you have told me of these two humans, Nagini replied, I must agree with you. It sounds like they have taken it upon themselves to learn on their own in secret, much like you did when

you were but a youngling yourself. Look to the places protected and hidden, and I suspect you will find them.

Voldemort was about to reply, when a knock came from his study door. "My lord," a house elf called out. "Mr. Malfoy has returned from Azkaban. He and the others were successful in freeing your imprisoned followers and finalizing the alliance with the Dementors.

Voldemort's mood improved ten-fold upon hearing this news. He bade the house elf to enter and after thanking the him for the news, he told him to inform the kitchen staff to start preparing a grand feast in honor of those who went to Azkaban because of their public loyalty to him. He also had the house elf inform the healers to prepare potions to aid his followers' recovery.

At the feast, Voldemort welcomed his newly freed followers back into his service. "It is good to see all of my loyal followers once again reunited in common purpose. For now, rest and regain your strength for soon the Wizarding World will once again tremble at your power. Tomorrow, Ivan Pachorka, a Russian wandmaker sympathetic to our cause, will arrive to craft new wands to replace the ones the Ministry destroyed upon your incarceration."

The rest of the feast went off well, with the newly freed Death Eaters being brought up to speed with what had been happening in the Wizarding World since their incarceration. Shortly before the meal ended, an eaglehawk flew into the feast hall and landed in front of Lucius Malfoy. Knowing that it must be important enough for Narcissa to send Feric to a meeting, Lucius took the message from the raptor's offered leg and quickly scanned the letter and the accompanying memory image included. His eyes widening as he looked at the memory image, Lucius quickly handed the both it and the letter to Voldemort. "My lord, Narcissa sends news about Potter!" Lucius explained as Voldemort looked on as he waited for an explanation for the interruption.

Upon hearing Lucius's explanation, Voldemort took the letter and memory image from Lucius.

Lucius,

I know you are meeting with our lord, but this information seemed important enough to warrant the interruption that I am sure it's arrival

will cause. One of your contacts in the Ministry forwarded the enclosed memory image stating it showed Potter and Granger leaving the Department of Education. Your contact was able to learn that they were there for the purpose of taking their O.W.L. exams a few weeks ago. While he recognized Potter and Granger, he was unable to determine the identity of the man who was accompanying them. He is currently looking into this man's identity.

-Narcissa

His elation about confirming Potter was more than likely still in Britain quickly faded when he saw the man accompanying Potter and Granger. After cursing profusely in Parseltongue, Voldemort managed to get his anger under control. Looking out at his followers, he saw every one of them bore a look of unmitigated fear. Forcing himself to remain calm, Voldemort stated, "You all have nothing to fear. Lucius, please inform Narcissa that she was right to send this message when she did. While it is good to know that Potter is most likely still in Britain, that fact of who he is with is vastly more important."

"My lord," Bellatrix asked hesitantly, "who is this person that vexes you so?"

"Someone who should, by all rights, be dead. His name, or at least the one he was going by when I last saw him, is Dari Àrmann. Where his true loyalty lies, I do not know. While he fought alongside Dumbledore during the war against Grindelwald, I know for certain he does not follow Dumbledore or even the British Ministry for that matter. He does not use a wand, nor, given the level of magic he is capable of, does he seem to need one. Simply put, the man is an enigma."

"Would he be open to joining our cause?" Augustus Rookwood asked, intrigued by this new player in the game.

"Dumbledore would, of his own free will, publicly announce his full support to our cause before Dari Àrmann would even begin to consider joining us. Actually, that fact alone would cause him to reject any attempts at bringing him over to our side."

"Forgive me for asking, but why should he be dead, my lord?" Thorfinn Rowle asked.

"Because nothing living, dead, or undead should survive being engulfed in Fiendfyre, especially if it came from Gellert Grindelwald himself," Voldemort explained. "The fact he hasn't appeared to have aged is even more puzzling. I would suspect a glamour or Polyjuice, except for the tattoos on his neck. I know from previous attempts, that something prevents them from appearing using either method of disguise."

- FLASHBACK -

Potsdam, Germany, February 1945

Thomas Marvolo Riddle, fresh from Hogwarts and a member of the Dark Lord Grindelwald's Knights of Walpurgis, was excited. It had been passed down through the ranks that the Dark Lord had finally forced Albus Dumbledore to confront him and prove once and for all that Dumbledore was the lesser wizard. It was surmised that Dumbledore would be arriving within the next few hours.

Currently, Riddle and the rest of his unit were battling a group of wizards from Britain and America. Riddle and the others were managing to hold their line against them, but they were starting to take heavy losses. After three hours of guerrilla style fighting in the pouring rain, it looked as if they would either have to surrender to the Allied Wizards, or make a run for it.

A loud crack sounded in front of them and the Dark Lord Gellert Grindelwald appeared in a cloud of smoke and fire. "Wizards of the so called Allied forces, I give you one chance to abandon your hopeless cause and leave this place."

A bolt of lightning crashed down directly in front of the dark wizard. The blast threw Grindelwald back several feet. Standing back up and brushing himself off, Gellert looked out toward the direction from which the attacking wizards had been firing spells from. A lone figure dressed in a brown, hooded cloak was walking toward him. Stopping several feet in front of Gellert, the figure pulled back his hood to reveal a middle aged man with shoulder length brown hair with a full beard.

"Gellert Grindelwald," the man said. "Cease your dark activities and leave the Muggles to fight their own war."

Laughing, Gellert replied, "Fool. Who are you to demand such a thing from me, the greatest wizard of our time."

"I am the Druid Dari Àrmann," the man answered. "The Wizarding World has no place in interfering with the Muggle World's conflicts. Return to your high tower and leave the Muggles to fight their own battles. Refuse, and your life will be forfeit as the Balance must be restored."

In answer, Gellert sent out a blast of dark energy from his wand. For the next several minutes, the two sent spell after spell at each other. While Gellert was starting to tire, the druid seemed to be going as strong as ever. Dari Àrmann suddenly stopped sending spells out and called out, "The end of your reign as Dark Lord approaches. My task here is done."

Angry at this mocking announcement, Gellert summoned all of his hate and anger and called forth a blast of Fiendfyre. Surging forward, the dark fire soon engulfed the druid and left behind a charred husk. His laughter at his fallen opponent was soon cut off by the arrival of his old friend, Albus Dumbledore.

- END OF FLASHBACK -

This news revealed by their dark lord, caused a look of utter shock to appear on the Death Eaters' faces. Surviving Fiendfyre was said to be as unlikely as surviving the Killing Curse.

"This brings a whole new complexity to the matter," Voldemort stated. "As of now, I will be handling the Potter matter personally. No one is to interfere or try and track either Harry Potter or Hermione Granger down. Dolohov, where do we stand with the vampire clans?"

"Three of the thirteen clans have agreed to an alliance with us," Antonin Dolohov replied. "The remaining ten have resolved to remain neutral in Wizarding matters. They will neither help nor hinder us."

"Neutrality is acceptable," stated Voldemort. "Fenrir, where do we stand with the werewolf tribes?"

"Of the three tribes I have made contact with, only the Tanis Tribe will side with us. The Gladius and Quixoi tribes want nothing to do

with us. They are content to remain apart from the rest of the world, and want no part in our cause or Dumbledore's," Fenrir Greyback answered.

"Again, neutrality is acceptable," replied Voldemort. "As Macnair hasn't returned from negotiating with the giants, we will hold off further plans until his return. For now, continue with your assignments."

As the Death Eaters were leaving Riddle Manor, Severus Snape approached Bellatrix about taking Theodore Nott under her wing in regards to Transfiguration.

"As soon as the healer clears me, I will contact you in regards to setting something up with young Nott," Bellatrix replied with a wild glint in her eyes. "It's good to know that the younger generation of Slytherins is taking things seriously. I was afraid with our lord's forced absence they would become complacent and weak."

- Dari Àrmann's Cottage -

Harry and Hermione were practicing their sword-work when Dari Àrmann returned from helping a couple in Glastonbury who still followed the Old Ways, and wanted their newborn daughter blessed in the ancient traditions. Not wanting to disturb them, Dari Àrmann stayed just out of view and watched as Harry and Hermione sparred with each other. Those two have come a long way since they arrived. They accomplished in six months, what most Druidic Initiates take over a year to achieve. I think they're ready for the next leg of their journey in becoming the next generation of druids.

As he continued to watch his students, his thoughts turned to the memories of his own training as a druid and even further back to the time when he was a boy living in Catal Hoyuk. His father, Enki, was the town historian and the keeper of his people's past. His mother, Asharru, was a respected member of the town council. It was a time of peace and prosperity, when things were much simpler. A time when a young boy called Sisuthros, along with the other children of the town, lived a reasonably carefree life. Then the Horde came and the boy's life was changed forever. Fate would see him leave his childhood, behind and become a warrior dedicated to defending against the growing Darkness. Millennia have passed since then and in that time Sisuthros had kept the promise he made to his first

teacher. I may no longer go by the name of Sisuthros, but the promise I made to Radjni still rings true in my heart and soul.

Shaking his head to clear his mind of these thoughts of his past, Dari Àrmann walked into the clearing where Harry and Hermione were taking a break from sparring. "And how has your day been, my young friends."

Turning toward Dari Àrmann, Harry and Hermione greeted the druid and stated that they had had a productive day exploring the forest. "That is good to hear, now let's head back to the cottage and see what Dobby has made for supper."

Upon hearing Dari Àrmann mention Dobby, both Harry and Hermione froze. Turning toward the druid, Harry asked, "How did you know Dobby was here?"

Chuckling, Dari Àrmann explained that while Dobby was bonded to the Potter Family, the house elf came to him and informed him of his intentions shortly after locating Harry and Hermione. "No offense to Dobby," Dari Àrmann said, "but that is one strange house elf."

"He can be a little eccentric," Hermione explained, "but his heart is in the right place. He has helped us more times than I care to count at Hogwarts. Both Harry and I trust him with our lives."

Harry nodded in agreement. "He's persistent too. Anytime we try to help with the cooking or dishes, he proceeds to lecture us on how it isn't proper and kicks us out of the kitchen."

"We've finally managed to convince him to let us be responsible for our bedroom," Hermione added. "Explaining it in terms of teaching us responsibility and keeping things in order, seemed to help. Harry tried that route with the kitchen but Dobby put his foot down on that."

"Getting house elves to change their mind, once they've decided on something," Dari Àrmann commented, "is an act of futility at best, and dangerous at worst."

At this point, the three had reached the cottage and were greeted with an array of wonderful smells coming from the kitchen. During dinner, Dari Àrmann informed Harry and Hermione they had reached the point in their training where it was time for them to

return to the outside world to perform a task which would aid in restoring balance. "This is the hardest part of training to become a druid, as the initiate must remain true to the druidic traditions and philosophy. This single part can last from several months to several years, depending on the initiate and the task itself. For example, my teacher's task took three months to complete, where mine took two years."

"Ours involves the prophecy Brigid gave to you, isn't it," Harry asked.

Nodding, Dari Àrmann reassured them that they did not have to do this task alone. In many cases, accepting help when needed is the only way to complete it successfully. "My task was shared with three other initiates and even then we had help from others. Now, while I can't interfere directly, being your teacher, I will aid you where I can, as I have my own oaths to fulfill."

After discussing it for a while longer, it was decided that Harry and Hermione would leave for the Burrow the next morning. After spending some time with the Weasleys, they would head to Potter Manor which they would use as a sanctuary of sorts.

- Office of Amelia Bones, Head of DMLE -

Amelia Bones sat in her office thinking on the consequences of the last few hours. Shortly after blacking out near one of the Ministry holding cells on one of her regular checks, she was approached by William Croaker. Apparently the Unspeakables had been keeping an eye on Albus Dumbledore for some time as they suspected he was hiding something important. When the agent Croaker had assigned to shadow Amelia reported that Albus had been arrested, but due to Auror Shacklebolt's interference escaped after altering her memory. After Croaker had restored her memory of what actually happened, Amelia was livid. How dare that manipulative old coot think only he knows what's best for our world, Amelia thought as she paced in her office. After her memory had been restored, William Croaker advised her to act like she was still affected by the memory charm. Dumbledore was still powerful and held a great deal of influence. If he was going to be taken down, it had to be done carefully and quietly. As much as she hated it, Amelia had to agree with Croaker and agreed to keep silent and continue to build up evidence against Dumbledore.

The Unspeakable went on to tell her the only two Aurors that they could be certain she could trust were Master Auror Alastor Moody and Auror Nymphadora Tonks. While Alastor Moody was known to be on good terms with Dumbledore, he did not follow him blindly and he was currently looking deeper into Dumbledore's involvement in recent events. As Auror Tonks' main trainer at the Auror Academy, he seemed to have passed on his philosophy of questioning everything and giving trust carefully. Remembering her own training under Moody, Amelia wasn't too surprised at this. Croaker, before leaving, advised Amelia to talk with Arthur Weasley as he may have more information she could add to her file on Dumbledore. Deciding the more information she had the better prepared she would be, she sent a message over to Arthur Weasley stating she had a few questions regarding a ongoing case regarding Muggles she could use his input on.

As she continued to pace her office, Amelia's secretary Jane Williams called in stating that Arthur Weasley was here to see her. As Arthur entered her office, Amelia motioned for him to have a seat. Taking a seat behind her desk, Amelia looked at Arthur and asked, "What do you know of Albus Dumbledore's involvement with the disappearance of one Harry Potter and Hermione Granger?"

Smiling, Arthur began to tell her everything that he and his wife and learned since the beginning of summer up until now.

- The Burrow -

Later that evening, during supper, as Arthur was telling Molly about his meeting with Amelia Bones, there was a knock on their door and a gruff voice calling out stating that it was Alastor Moody. Upon verifying it was Moody, Molly let the old Auror in. "Evening Molly, Arthur," Alastor stated as he took a seat. "I'd like to say this is simply a social visit, but I've heard some disturbing things and would like to hear your input."

"I believe," Arthur answered, "you are referring to the fact that Molly and I have both resigned from the Order and broken with Dumbledore due to certain unnamed actions."

"You believe correctly," Alastor confirmed. "Now, Albus tells me it's simply a misunderstanding and there is no need for people to be alarmed. My gut is telling me Albus is hiding something, so I came

here to see if you would clarify what the blazes Dumbledore did to make you two, of all people, break your allegiance with him. I know it has something to do with young Potter and Granger, but I don't know what."

"That meddling old goat withheld information from Harry and Hermione about their families," Molly said, barely able to remain calm. "Information, he was by law required to inform them of by their eleventh birthday. Not only that, he ignored James and Lily's will in regards to the placement of Harry should they die and completely concealed Hermione's true heritage from her."

Alastor did not like the sounds of this, however nothing prepared him for what Arthur said next.

"Albus is also the main suspect in the placement of various blocks on the two's magic which blocked them from accessing the majority of their magical ability and possibly other things as well. While we can't prove this, I strongly suspect it to be true given that this information comes directly from Harry and Hermione, and neither one of them can lie well enough to fool both Molly and I, not to mention Remus.

Alastor almost lost control, himself, upon hearing this. There is no way either Arthur or Molly would state something like this if they weren't reasonably certain that it was true. Especially if it involves Albus. I'm going to have to do some digging on my own, but I do not like how things are going with this.

"I don't doubt what you are telling me," Alastor said, "but I need to do some checking on my own about this whole mess. I'll stay in touch." As he was leaving, Alastor turned and added, "If either of you hear from Potter or Granger, tell them congratulations on managing to elude both us and any Death Eaters looking for them. It shows they're taking this seriously. You can also tell them to keep up the good work."

Relieved to know that Moody seemed to believe their side of the story, Arthur and Molly finished up their supper before retiring to the living room to relax by the fire before turning in for the evening.

The next morning the two of them were enjoying a lazy breakfast, as Arthur had the day off, when there came a knock on the front door.

"Hello, is anyone home?" came two voices that both Arthur and Molly would recognize anywhere. Rushing to the door, they were stunned at the sight before them. While it was obviously Harry and Hermione, both had shed their childlike appearances and stood before them as a young man and woman who both looked healthy and the void of any traces of malnourishment or neglect. Harry had shot up several inches and not only had grown his hair out longer so it resembled a mane down to the middle of his back, his glasses were missing. Hermione had also grown her hair out a touch longer than normal, thus losing some of its natural frizziness, but had also added a couple of inches to her height. They also looked as though they had had no shortage of exercise as both Harry and Hermione looked extremely fit and in shape.

Recovering first, Molly gently took the two by their arms and pulling them inside, stated firmly, "Harry James Potter, Hermione Jean Drake, I expect to hear an explanation as to what the blazes you two were thinking when you took off without telling anyone where you were going." In a softer tone, she added, "Mind you, I can understand your reasons for leaving, but not telling anyone is far from acceptable in my book." Upon finishing scolding her adopted children, she embraced both of them and brought them into the kitchen where she began to fix them breakfast as she waited for their explanation.

Winced at the use of their full names, both Harry and Hermione relaxed a little when Molly told them she understood why they left, but the not telling anyone was still inexcusable. Love, I think we owe them at the very least, an explanation of what has happened. Given the fact that I don't think either one of us could pull off lying to Mrs. Weasley, attempting it would not help our case very much either, Harry sent over their bond.

I agree, Hermione responded, while we can't go into details, I think they've earned the right to hear a generalized version of what we've been up to this summer. Although I'd like to leave out the advanced studies we've been doing since your name came out of the Goblet of Fire last year.

Good point, Harry agreed. I'd like to keep that bit of information to ourselves, at least for now.

As they ate breakfast, Harry and Hermione explained how after getting together and their Life Bond forming, they realized that the bond had removed blocks from their magical core, when Dobby explained that he had been bonded with Harry since the end of their second year. As they could now feel the elf bond, where they couldn't before, this told them something had been blocking it. Remembering something Bill had mentioned the goblins had done for another wizard, they went to Gringotts to see if they could shed some light on what had happened. It was during this visit they learned of their family heritage and received verification that all blocks that had been placed on them had been removed when the Life Bond had been formed.

Interrupting them for a moment, Molly asked, "From what little I know of magical bonds, there is only one way to complete them. I'm a mother, so I have to ask; how far have the two of you taken your relationship?"

Blushing deep red, the Harry and Hermione both groaned at the embarrassment of being asked that question by someone they viewed as a mother figure. After making liberal use of their Occlumency shields, they replied they hadn't gone that far yet.

Helping them out, Arthur confirmed, "Suspecting they had a life bond with each other, I did some research on it, and learned that while it is one of the strongest and deepest bonds to be formed between to people, time and true feelings of love are all that it takes for the bond to completely form. I suspect that it had been forming for sometime, as this type of bond usually takes years to completely form."

"Probably started shortly after the troll incident during our first year at Hogwarts," Hermione surmised.

"That sounds about right," Harry agreed. "After learning what Dumbledore had hidden from us, we decided that as we could no longer trust him, and as neither of our 'guardians' wanted anything to do with us, we started looking for somewhere else to go after the school year ended. You have to realize that at this point we were still shocked at the level of betrayal from Dumbledore we didn't know who we should trust. It was shortly after the end of the term that we met Dari Àrmann. After talking with him and learning that he was an actual druid, we accepted his offer to be trained by him. Before you

ask Mrs. Weasley, he had taken a Wizard's oath that he meant us no harm and would not betray us. He only wanted to help us get out from under Dumbledore's control."

"Did you say he was a druid?" Molly asked. When Harry and Hermione replied that he was she commented, "History states that they were all wiped out by Caesar's sorcerers when he conquered this land. My grandfather would have been pleased to learn Caesar wasn't completely successful. He was among the few wizards that still held to the ancient beliefs of our ancestors."

"You mentioned that he was training you," Arthur asked. "What type of training would that be?"

Smiling, the two took out two sheets of parchment from their robes and handed them to Arthur. "Besides continuing the same studies we would have done at Hogwarts, he initiated us into the ways of the Druidic Order."

At this point Molly quickly found a seat as she didn't think she could take many more surprises like this. As Arthur was about to ask something, Molly held up her hand. "Don't bother asking anything about any druidic training they have received. While the druids were known for their protection of the land and its people, they kept the knowledge of their art and abilities secret. Even if Harry and Hermione wanted to tell us, they would be forbidden to, possibly by magical oaths."

Breathing a sigh of relief, Harry and Hermione relaxed. "Thank you for understanding Mrs. Weasley," Hermione said.

"Aside from learning the ways of the druids," Harry continued, "Dari Àrmann has made sure we kept up with our regular studies. There were times he made Professor McGonagall seem like a laid back and easy going teacher. Over the summer we've been learned skills used by Aurors, Curse Breakers, and Healers."

"Looking at your O.W.L. results," Arthur commented. "I'd say his teaching style worked. I'm very proud of you both. I'm glad to see that you are taking your studies seriously."

Taking the parchments from Arthur, Molly looked over their O.W.L. results. "I agree," Molly said with a smile. "Hermione, you got an O

in everything but History of Magic, but an E is nothing to be ashamed of given who the professor is. The same goes for you Harry, although I'm curious about the E in Astronomy. I'm not upset, just curious."

"I was still adjusting to the fact I could see more stars, and got a bit mixed up on the practical portion of the exam."

"I noticed you weren't wearing your glasses anymore," Molly said. "How were you able to fix your eyes? I was under the impression that poor eyesight couldn't be eliminated."

"Normally, I would agree with you," Harry explained. "I inherited my eyesight from my mother. It was my time living with the Dursleys that caused my eyesight to go bad."

"One of the things I found when I was helping Harry study for the Tri-Wizard Tournament, was a reference to the Raggiungere Potion," Hermione continued. "It was used in the past to repair damage done to Muggleborns caused by neglect and abuse by their Muggle relatives."

"We were able to find the instructions on how to brew the potion in the Restricted Section of the Hogwarts Library," Harry stated. "We managed to complete the potion shortly before the end of the term."

Not wanting to know any details regarding the Dursleys, neither Arthur nor Molly asked anything further, as they were just glad both Harry and Hermione were away from their previous guardians. "How long will the two of you be staying?" Molly asked.

"Only for the day," Harry replied. "We can't tell you where we'll be, as we don't want anyone to get it from you by force or from your mind."

"We'll stay in touch," Hermione continued. "We should have already gone, but both Harry and I missed you and wanted to reassure you that we were okay."

Arthur and Molly were sad that the two couldn't stay longer, but they understood their reasoning. The longer they were out in the open, the greater the chance of someone locating them. This was

especially true, since the breakout at Azkaban. "Will we see you for Christmas?" Molly asked with a hopeful look in her eyes.

"We don't know," Harry answered. "We'll try though."

"Just know if you ever need help," Arthur stated, "we're here for you. After all, family looks after family."

Their eyes brightening at Arthur's words, both Harry and Hermione assured their surrogate parents they wouldn't forget.

For the rest of the day, the four of them simply enjoyed each others' company. During which, Molly and Arthur took Hermione and Harry, respectively off to one side and gave them "the talk". While they trusted the two teenagers to use a modicum of common sense, they were, nevertheless, teenagers.

The only thing that marred the day, was when Arthur warned Harry and Hermione that before parting ways with Dumbledore, they had been informed that Voldemort had returned. "According to Albus, Voldemort took part in some ritual at the graveyard you were taken to at the end of the Tri-Wizard tournament. This ritual allowed Voldemort to regain his corporeal form. He stated your memory of this was blocked by some charm Voldemort cast on you, before you escaped. The breakout at Azkaban, according to Albus, was orchestrated by Voldemort to free his imprisoned followers."

"Let me guess," Harry stated, "the Ministry is denying Voldemort's return and is condemning Dumbledore for trying to cause panic."

Molly, who had been looking at Harry and Hermione during Arthur's telling of Voldemort's return, realized something as her maternal instincts were going into overdrive. Those two were not surprised at all when Arthur told them about Voldemort's return. In fact they looked down right guilty when Arthur mentioned the memory block. Managing to reign in her temper, Molly interrupted her husband in a stern and cold tone, "Hadrian James Potter, Hermione Jean Drake, please tell me that the two of you haven't known about Voldemort this whole time and tricked Albus into thinking otherwise."

The sudden loss of color in Harry and Hermione's faces answered her question. Oh shit, we're dead. was said in stereo through the bond they shared. Gulping, Harry said, "It seemed like a good idea

at the time, given what we suspected of Dumbledore and the general trust issues we were having, not to mention the Ministry's reaction."

Visibly restraining herself from throttling them, Molly managed to calm herself down with the fact that as much as she hated it, Harry had a valid point. Given all that had happened to them, and the chaos surrounding the whole tournament, Molly had to admit that it may have been for the best.

"We did warn our friends before we pulled our disappearing act," Hermione commented. "We suspected that Voldemort would try and lay low for awhile until he had a chance to fully recover from the ritual and call all of his followers to him."

"They do have valid points, Molly," Arthur stated. "Given the atmosphere at the time, it was probably the safe thing for them to do."

Sighing, Molly replied, "I know Arthur, but that doesn't mean I have to like it."

Going over to Molly, Harry wrapped her in a hug, and whispered, "Sorry for lying mum, it won't happen again."

Knowing full well what Harry had done, Hermione got up and did the same thing. They also turned to Arthur and apologized to him as well. "You're both forgiven. Just try not to keep things like this from us. It's a parent's job to worry about their children and help them when they need it." It was when Harry and Hermione moved away from Molly after their hug, that she noticed the marks on their necks.

"On a brighter topic," Molly said. "As I said earlier, my grandfather kept to the Old Ways while he was alive. He would often tell me tales of our past and the beliefs of our ancestors. While I was, and still am, a Christian at heart, I still grew up with a familiarity of the Old Ways. One of the things I learned at my grandfather's knee was about the druids themselves. While the druids, as a whole, were were priests of all the ancient gods of our ancestors, there were a select few among them that were chosen to serve a particular deity. These chosen few bore the mark of their patron on their necks. While unscrupulous people have attempted to create false copies of these marks, none were said to have succeeded. My grandfather

said this was because they were marks of divine favor and their very nature prevented the duplication." Looking at Harry, Molly said, "Cernunnos." Turning to Hermione, she said, "Brigid."

Smiling, Hermione said, "Dari Àrmann will be glad to know the Old Ways are at least remembered in the cities, even if their practice has faded almost from sight."

"I suspect that it was Cernunnos' patronage that rid you of your curse scar, Harry," Molly said.

"Dari Àrmann suggested that there was something about my scar that offended Cernunnos, so the Forest God removed it," Harry answered.

Nodding, Arthur stated, "Given how you got the scar, it sounds like a reasonable assumption."

- Nurmengard Prison -

Before Albus Dumbledore was a towering fortress, built of jet black stone, its wrought iron gates, barring entry to all but a select few. Albus Dumbledore, being one of those select few, passed through the gates and walked up to the black structure itself. Set above its main entry way was a bronze plaque bearing the words 'For The Greater Good'. Directly above this was a sigil engraved directly into the stone itself. The sigil was that of a triangle enclosing a circle. The circle itself was divided down the middle by a solid line.

With a casual wave of his hand, Albus caused the doors to open. It has been a long time since I have entered Gellert's prison, Albus thought as he looked around the walls, which depicted scenes of several of Gellert Grindelwald's victories in times past. Smiling at the memories the images conjured, Albus soon found himself heading deep within the complex, his feet tracing a path he once made many times in the past. After a few minutes of walking, he came upon a set of oaken doors which opened softly at his touch. As he entered a room looking much like the library back at Hogwarts, Albus made his way toward the back of the room where ancient tomes and scrolls resided. It was here, bent over a table covered in tomes, sat the very man Albus had journeyed to see. Looking up from what he was reading, the man smiled at Albus and said, "Hello Albus, my old friend. It has been a long time since we last met."

"Very true, Gellert," Albus replied. "Very true. I'm glad to see you are still doing well."

"As well as one can expect," stated Gellert Grindelwald. "The house elves see to it that I eat regularly and get at least some rest at night. For the most part, I busy myself with research. You do realize that one day I will find a way out of this prison and take up my cause again. I would have killed you, had our positions been reversed."

"Be that as it may be," Albus replied as he took a seat, "my days of killing are over. I've found there are other ways to see my goals realized, without staining my hands with blood. I am confident that you will live out the remaining years of your life here in the prison of your own creation."

Chuckling, Gellert Grindelwald stated, "My old friend, I was once as confident in my power and abilities as you are now. I ended up being sorely mistaken, and I feel that one day you will be as well."

AN: And chapter 15th is finished. Sirius returns in the next chapter and we learn more about the results of the merging with Drizt. Harry and Hermione settle into Potter Manor and begin to make plans. We also see things progress in Hogwarts. Dari Àrmann begins working on another task he has been given.

Chapter 16: Meetings and the Hunt

- Dari Àrmann's Cottage -

It had been two days since Harry and Hermione had left the forest and journeyed to Ottery St. Catchpole, a small town located in Devon, England, to spend some time with Arthur and Molly Weasley. From there they stated they would head to Potter Manor, where Dobby was making sure that it was livable and stocked with supplies – both magical and mundane. Even though Potter Manor is somewhere in Wales, between Apparation and their elemental travel, those two have the ability to easily travel anywhere in Britain. I foresee those two turning the British Wizarding World on their heads. It should be quite amusing to watch, as the Ministry along with those that blindly follow it are in need of a wake up call.

I would have to agree with you, a voice stated from behind the druid. To long has corruption and deceit run rampant in this land.

Turning around, Dari Àrmann saw the corporeal form of Cernunnos, the Forest Lord. Kneeling, Dari Àrmann said, "Greetings, my lord. How can I serve you?"

Rise my son, Cernunnos said. Know that I and my brethren are pleased with your teaching young Harry and Hermione. From them, the druid line will be reborn.

"It's nice to know that I am not to be the last," Dari Àrmann stated, as he relaxed now that the formalities were observed. "While I do what I can to help, man's greed and avarice has too strong of a foothold to uproot completely."

Taking a seat near the fire, Cernunnos explained the reason for his visit. As you know, he began, there are still Wizarding Families, albeit few, who still follow the Old Ways. Augusta Longbottom née Croaker has carried on the traditions taught to her by her father Miles Croaker, and she has passed on the traditions to her son and now her grandson. She has called upon myself to aid in bringing vengeance to those who attacked her son and daughter-in-law, and drove them to insanity. She trusted her people's government to bring justice to her family, but due to the rampant corruption and incompetency, those who were responsible were able to escape.

"Would her grandson be called Neville by any chance?" Dari Àrmann asked. "Harry and Hermione spoke of a good friend of theirs called Neville Longbottom. Apparently, Neville is a genius when it comes to Herbology and would probably do better in his Potions class if it weren't for his professor sabotaging all but his own house."

Neville is indeed Augusta's grandson, and a fine lad. He, like his grandmother, is true to the Old Ways. Cernunnos replied. Due to the Great Compact we are restricted from interfering in mortal affairs in most cases. As such, I am tasking you with the job of tracking down Rodolphus, Rabastan, and Bellatrix Lestrange and sending their spirits to face their final judgment before Teutatis. The Croaker Family has been true to the Old Ways since the beginning and it is only right that we provide some sort of aid when they ask.

"I know a bit about what happened during those times nearly two decades ago," Dari Àrmann stated. "As such I can understand where Augusta Longbottom is coming from. She let the Ministry have their chance to do what was right and, as usual, they managed to botch it up."

Seeing that his task was complete, Cernunnos bid Dari Àrmann farewell and returned to his domain in the Outer Realms. It appears that I will be more involved with Harry and Hermione's task than I first expected. From what I've been able to learn, the Lestranges are high up in the Death Eater ranks. They were among the few Death Eaters who refused to denounce their loyalty to Riddle and choose to brave Azkaban instead. Their deaths will surely enrage Riddle, as it shows that there are those out there that have no issues with dealing with his followers in a permanent manner. It should also shake up Dumbledore as an unknown third player in this war should upset his plans. Although, it wouldn't surprise me if he immediately suspects me. The meddling old goat hates it when he doesn't know everything that is going on. Packing a few things into a rucksack, Dari Àrmann locked up his cottage again and, after shifting into the form of a hawk, winged his way toward London and the Leaky Cauldron.

- Hogwarts: Headmaster's Office -

Albus Dumbledore was hard pressed to think of a time when his plans had all gone wrong. With the news that Potter and Drake had taken their O.W.L.s through the Ministry, he had lost the last hold he

had on them to assure their return to Hogwarts. With them out of his control, he could no longer lead Potter into a confrontation with Tom and allow himself to be sacrificed thus paving the way for Dumbledore to confront Riddle and defeat him. Thus providing the means for him to bring Britain under his control.

He didn't dare threaten their friends remaining at Hogwarts as that would not only further alienate the staff, but also cause the eyes of various influential families to turn toward him and his activities. Such scrutiny, he could not afford at this time. My influence has taken a beating with the Weasley Family breaking away from me. Their departure has caused several others to start questioning my actions. I need to proceed carefully until I can regain the influence I've lost. Fortunately, my Talon Marked are in key enough areas that my information network has not been hurt. At this point, given all that is happened, I need to be seen as taking an active role in handling the Death Eaters that have escaped, and when he reveals himself, Tom Riddle. As only Tom, Severus, Aberforth and myself know of the "prophecy", it should not become an issue.

Satisfied that he had the bare beginnings of a new plan, Albus's mood brightened as he began to develop it more. Contrary to what Gellert may think, I will soon be in control of Britain and I can begin to continue with the plan at which Gellert had failed.

- Black Manor -

Sirius Orion Black firmly believed that merging with the demon Drizt was one of the best decisions he had ever made. Not only did it free him from the soul brand that was known as the Dark Mark, his magical core was drastically increased along with his occult knowledge. His senses had also been heightened along with his reflexes. He was currently in the Black Family Library poring through mystical tomes that his family had been collecting for generations. With his increase in power, spells and rituals which were previously beyond his ability, were now within his grasp.

Along with his increased ability in normal Wizarding spells, Sirius was also learning how to harness his newly acquired demonic abilities. Of these new abilities, Sirius had made ample use of his summoning power to bring over a variety of imps. Upon receiving stone simulacrum from Sirius, the imps that did not take up guard

duty around the manor, positioned themselves around various parts of London to act as spies. Sirius's ability to communicate with the imps in their own tongue not only made it easier for him to convey his wishes, but also showed the imps that he saw himself as more demonic than human. Drizt had explained that only a being who was accepting of his demonic nature could truly speak in the demonic tongue without harming themselves.

Deciding to take a break from the tomes, Sirius went down to the main study and turned on the Wizarding Wireless. Relaxing in one of the various chairs, he summoned a ball of Hellfire and began to weave it into various patterns. Hellfire is such an amazing substance. Sirius thought as he began to mold the flames into various shapes. Besides its purely destructive ability, I suspect it could be used for something practical as lighting up a room. It would have the advantage of not being able to be doused easily like other magically produced flames. This definitely warrants some serious experimentation.

As Sirius was relaxing, Kreacher, the Black Family head house elf, popped into the room and reminded his master that he was due to meet with the Dark Lord in a short while.

"Thank you Kreacher," Sirius replied. "I had forgotten about the gathering tonight. Please let the kitchen staff know that I will not be home for dinner, so they shouldn't wait up for me."

"Kreacher will relay Master Black's instructions," Kreacher replied with a bow and popped out.

I wonder what will be in store for us at the gathering tonight. Sirius thought as he got up to dress for the night's activities. I know Bella is anxious to get out and cause the mayhem she excelled at prior to her incarceration. Hopefully, the potions she has been taking have helped restore her mind and body to what it was. She always was my favorite cousin growing up. She not only spoke her mind, but she could back up what ever she said.

After getting dressed and placing his Death Eater mask on, Sirius went to the fire place and called out, "Riddle Manor."

A few minutes later, Sirius stepped out of another fireplace, and into the waiting area of Riddle Manor. Lucius Malfoy and Walden

Macnair were already there waiting. While Sirius struck up a conversation with them, the remaining members of the Dark Lord's inner circle continued to arrive.

"So Lucius," Sirius asked. "How are Draco and his friends doing at Hogwarts?"

"Draco and the others are performing well in their studies according to Severus," Lucius stated proudly. "Even young Ronald has shown that he is taking this seriously. I must say, whatever was in Artus Weasley's journal is what truly opened his eyes to the truth. From what Draco says, he is determined to regain the respect and power his family has let slip away. Severus assured me that he is doing the memory of his great uncle proud with his appreciation of Potions. His rediscovery of the Magus Clausus Elixir will be a boon to our cause. According to Severus, the fact that young Ronald insists on testing it further to make sure there are no undesirable side effects and to further narrow down the proper dosages for certain situations, shows his dedication to making sure that the potion is perfect before presenting the final product to our lord."

"It's good to hear there is hope for the next generation," Sirius replied. "I'm glad I decided to send young Weasley the journal, as it sounds like he is putting it to good use."

Several minutes later the gathered Death Eaters entered the meeting hall and knelt down and waited for their lord to arrive. Shortly after the last Death Eater entered the hall and knelt down, the Dark Lord, who had been under a powerful Disillusionment Charm, appeared in front of them.

"Rise my loyal followers," Voldemort stated in a commanding voice. "The time has come to reveal to the Wizarding World that I have returned. I wish to see the Dark Mark blanket the sky in the coming days, for its return will remind the weak what they should fear."

This announcement caused his inner circle to roar in excitement. Voldemort went on to tell Avery, Nott, and Mulciber to organize the various cells of Death Eaters to carry out certain raids and attacks in the coming weeks. After they left, the Dark Lord turned to the remainder of his inner circle.

"Lucius and Walden," Voldemort stated. "I want you to refrain from joining any raids, as I will need you keep your respectable positions free from any suspicion. We will have need of your influence in the Ministry soon enough."

Bowing to their lord, Lucius Malfoy and Walden Macnair left the room to return to their Ministry offices.

"Bellatrix, Narcissa, and Severus," Voldemort continued. "For you, I want you to continue as you have been doing. As with Lucius and Walden, I wish for you to refrain from taking part in the upcoming raids. Narcissa and Severus, your public images need to be maintained for now. Bellatrix, while I know you wish to return to causing mayhem amongst the populace, I need you fully healed and whole once more. For now rest and recover, although you may continue to educate young Theodore Nott in the art of Transfiguration."

Bowing to their lord, the three of them left the room to return to their previous duties.

"Rodolphus and Rabastan," Voldemort said as he turned to the Lestrangle brothers. "I want the two of you to disguise yourselves and begin sounding out the various neutral families and entice them into joining our cause."

Bowing as one, the Lestrangle brothers left the room to return to their quarters to begin planning.

Turning to the remaining member of his inner circle, Voldemort stated, "Sirius, I need you to begin researching into the ancient myths of the past. I need to know what truth lies in these legends, and how they can be made to serve our cause."

Sirius Black assured Voldemort that he would begin this task immediately. Upon leaving the room, Sirius chuckled to himself. I will do as Voldemort asks, but I will keep what I learn to myself for now.

- Hogwarts -

Ginny, Neville, and the twins were currently in a corner of the library with various wards and charms up to keep their conversation secret. Between the four of them, they had managed to crack the secret of

the Marauders' Map and had duplicated it so that all four of them had a copy. As for the original, the twins kept that locked up in their trunk, as they considered it a Potter Family heirloom and would return it to Harry when they saw him next. Using the maps, the four Gryffindors were keeping an eye on Ron and the three Slytherins he seemed to be associating with: Theodore Nott, Daphne Greengrass, and Draco Malfoy. The Slytherin Quartet, as Ginny had dubbed them, seemed to spend a lot of their free time down in the dungeons with Professor Snape.

When Ginny confronted Ron about hanging around Slytherins, he simply told her that it was time that he started thinking about his future and making the right contacts would help in outside of Hogwarts. Ron had even confessed to be dating Daphne Greengrass, a fact that not only were both sets of parents aware of, but approved of.

This fact surprised Ginny and the twins, as they didn't think that their parents would approve of the Greengrass family. Their father explained that while most of the Greengrass Family was in Slytherin, several ended up in Ravenclaw. This coupled with the fact the Greengrass Family was known for their neutrality in the last war, told them that Daphne was a suitable choice for Ron. If nothing else, she would help him develop some better manners and study habits. Realizing that their parents wouldn't hear that Ron had switched sides, Ginny, Fred, and George, along with Neville decided that it would be up to them to keep an eye on things.

"Alright," George continued. "At this point, what do we know for sure, besides the Slytherin Quartet have been meeting with Snape once a week for a few hours in the evening. We don't what they are working on though."

"I've learned that Narcissa Malfoy has met with Daphne Greengrass once every two weeks. Each time it is for around two hours," Ginny replied. "Narcissa Malfoy's excuse for being here is checking on the running of the school at the request of the Board of Governors."

"I'll bet that irritates Dumbledore," Neville stated.

"With the mess that happened during last term," George stated, "my dad says that the Board of Governors was livid at lack of security and overall carelessness that occurred. As Narcissa Malfoy has her

mastery in both Charms and Enchantments, they feel she is qualified to go over the wards and security charms around the castle."

"Draco has been meeting with Athanasius Kircher in the evenings for the past month," Neville said.

"Isn't he the colleague that Professor Snape has visiting in regards to some research project he is working on?" Ginny asked.

"He's supposed to be some renowned alchemist or something," Fred answered.

"With Ron meeting separately with Snape on Thursday evenings for 'Remedial Potions'," George stated, "I think I have an idea as to what is going on." With the others motioning for him to continue, George stated, "I suspect that Snape is giving them lessons of some sort as a group and they are individually getting lessons from the others. Given what they specialize in I figure Ron is learning more about Potions, Draco is learning about Alchemy, and Daphne is learning Enchantments."

"That seems to fit from what we've learned," Neville agreed. "But what is Nott learning? I'll bet he's getting special lessons from someone."

"It's from someone who can't be seen at Hogwarts," Fred stated. "He's been sneaking off of the grounds Monday and Tuesday evenings. I'm willing to bet he's going to meet the person who is instructing him. In what I don't know."

"The only thing that comes to mind is Transfiguration. Professor McGonagall has stated on several occasions that he seems to have a natural talent for it."

"If she's saying that," Ginny stated, "he must be good. She hardly ever gives out that type of compliment, even to someone from Gryffindor."

"So let's go under the assumption that he's learning more about Transfiguration," Neville stated, "until we learn otherwise."

Seeing as they had no other news to share, the four of them split up. Fred and George headed back to Gryffindor Tower, while Neville and Ginny head off to the greenhouses to help Professor Sprout with some new plants she had just gotten in. Shortly after they left, Alastor Moody faded into view. Nice job with the privacy wards, Moody thought. Fortunately, I was already within their boundaries when they went up. Those four seem to know something is up and are determined to find out what. After what I've learned from Arthur and Molly, I can't say I blame them. They may not know where Potter and Granger are, but that doesn't seem to be stopping them from doing what they can. Glad to see at least some students are taking this seriously.

- Hidden Classroom near Slytherin Common Room -

Severus Snape was pleased with the progress his chosen students were making. As he watched them practice various hexes and curses, Severus thought, If these four keep up with their current rate of progress, it wouldn't surprise me if the Dark Lord assigns them a mission to accomplish over the summer break. They may not bear the Dark Mark, but these four should have no trouble holding their own against several Death Eaters I could name. Several minutes later, Severus had them stop and decided to test their Occlumency Shields. Suffice to say, he was pleased with the results.

"While I was able to get by all of your shields," Severus commented, "all of your shields held me back for a considerable time. In a real life situation, this should be enough time to locate the person attempting to access your mind and deal with the situation. Mr. Weasley, Miss Greengrass, I am especially pleased with your progress. Not only have you been developing your shields, you have started to incorporate defenses into your walls."

Both Ron and Daphne nodded their heads in thanks. Professor Snape hardly ever gave out praise to students, even to Slytherin students. For him to give such a complement, meant he was truly pleased and impressed with their progress.

"Until we meet again next week," Severus stated, "I want you all to continue to work on your Occlumency and any other assignments your individual teachers have given you. I will be meeting with the three of them later this evening, and I expect to hear positive things about your progress in your chosen fields. Ronald, as I told you

earlier, I want you to continue your study of the Felix Felicis potion. I expect a full parchment roll with your observations, conclusions and any research you've done on the potion."

"I won't disappoint you sir," Ron stated respectfully.

Nodding, Severus excused the students, reminding them that curfew was in two hours, before heading off to his meeting with his three colleagues.

A short while later, upon leaving the boundaries of the castle wards, Severus pressed a stud on a simple bracelet he wore hidden beneath the left cuff of his robes. As the Portkey activated, the Potions Master failed to notice the figure of a student fade into view.

Taking out a small mirror, Ginny whispered, "Neville."

A moment later, Neville's face appeared in the mirror, "Yes love?"

"The Slytherin Quartet has finished meeting with Snape," Ginny replied with a smile at her betrothed's endearment. "I haven't had a chance to listen to the recording sent from the monitoring charm George placed on him earlier. Snape just left the grounds, probably by Portkey, and I suspect he may be gone for a while. If you planned on sneaking into his potions storeroom, now would be the time to do it."

"Thanks for the heads up," Neville said with an evil smile. "I find it ironic that Snape would never suspect me as the one who is systematically stealing his precious potion ingredients and replacing them with mundane substitutes."

"That's because, beloved, he still sees you as the bumbling first year who blew up cauldrons once a week. An impression that you seem to be more than willing to help along."

"Is it my fault Snape can't see past his preconceived views. The fact I act the part of a clueless idiot is utterly beside the point," Neville commented.

"Prat," Ginny said with a smile. "You'd better get going. I'm going to head on in and see what information we can learn from the recording."

- Knockturn Alley: Blood Moon Inn -

Dari Àrmann, under a glamour, was currently sipping a glass of firewhiskey and keeping an ear out for anything that might lead him to one or more of his targets. As he listened to the chatter of the other patrons of the inn, he overheard two wizards a couple of tables over from him mention the Zabini Family. Curious, he listened closer.

"I'm telling you Rab," one of the wizards stated. "The Zabinis are going to remain neutral in this whole mess and no amount of bribery or offers is going to change that."

"Dolph, my brother," Rab said with a chuckle, "if enticements are not working, why not try something more forceful? Let them know it's in their best interest to side with us."

Dolph just looked at Rab like he was completely off his rocker. "You'd have to have a serious death wish to threaten the Zabini Family. Serafina Zabini is a powerful enchantress and is rumored to have knowledge of some of the blacker aspects of magic. Her last seven husbands all died of mysterious causes, but not one could be traced to her. Not even our lord forced the issue during the last war. If Serafina Zabini says her family will remain neutral than I for one am not going to force the issue."

Taking a quick peek into their minds and a subtle check for glammers, Dari Àrmann learned that the two wizards were actually Rabastan and Rodolphus Lestrage. Who ever did the glamour disguising them does excellent work. Silently, he placed a simple trace on them and went back to observing the other patrons. Another hour went by before Rabastan and Rodolphus paid their tab and headed out. Waiting a few minutes to not arouse suspicion, Dari Àrmann paid for his drink and left the inn. Homing in on the trace, Dari Àrmann found that the Lestrage brothers were still in Knockturn Alley. Tracking them to a nearby apothecary, Dari Àrmann quickly placed wards up to prevent others from noticing anything and to discourage anyone else from entering the shop. Satisfied with his work, Dari Àrmann entered the shop to see Rabastan arguing with the owner about the price of various potion ingredients. I'm on shop owner's side. Given the ingredients Rabastan is talking about, those prices are more than reasonable.

Ah well, no time like the present. Sending out two stunners, Dari Àrmann dropped the Lestrangle brothers to the ground.

When the shop keep turned to Dari Àrmann, the druid stated, "No need to be alarmed my good man. I'm only after these two idiots. On a side note, I personally think your prices are more than fair. Looking around I noticed that some are even at bargain prices."

Relaxing, the shop keeper said, in a business like manner, "I mark my stock based on rarity and quality. The items you are referring to, are marked lower due to the substandard quality of them."

"A man of ethics," Dari Àrmann commented. "I can respect that." Going over to the fallen Death Eaters, he quickly removed any items he found on them. After disabling the two Portkeys he found, Dari Àrmann placed two pouches of coins on the counter.

"As these two won't need them," Dari Àrmann said with a smile. "I don't see any reason why you shouldn't make use of the money." With that, the druid took hold of Rabastan and Rodolphus and Apparated away.

Several miles away in Scotland, Dari Àrmann and his still unconscious passengers appeared deep within the Forbidden Forest. Upon securing them with rope, Dari Àrmann woke the two brothers up. They, of course, immediately started demanding their release and threatening him with pain and torture when the Dark Lord found out what he had done.

Rolling his eyes, Dari Àrmann stared coldly at them. "Rabastan Gregory Lestrangle, Rodolphus Marcus Lestrangle, you are both guilty of crimes against your fellow man and crimes against the land of Britain herself. For your actions, I sentence you to face the judgment of Teutatis."

Seeing that the two condemned men understood exactly what was happening, Dari Àrmann took a sword from within his robes and, holding it out in front of him with the blade pointing to the sky, intoned, "I, Dari Àrmann, druid of the Old Ways and willing hand of the Ancient Ones, send you before Teutatis, the ancient god of this land whose domain is justice and law."

With a single stroke of his blade, Dari Àrmann beheaded the Lestrangle brothers. Placing their heads in an oak box he removed from his robes and enlarged, Dari Àrmann sent out a call to the Acromantula colony Harry mentioned living within the forest. Confident the message was received, he took the oak box and Apparated away.

AN: And this makes sixteen chapters finished. In the next chapter we'll see Dari Àrmann continue his task and Voldemort's reaction to the deaths. We'll also see more of what is happening at Hogwarts, and take a look at Potter Manor. The Compact referred to in this chapter is the agreement held by all deities to limit their direct interference with the mortal realm. While there are exceptions to this agreement, it is held as sacred law and no deity will go against it. It was originally put into place after the Great Cataclysm which resulted in the destruction of the ancient cities and the departure of the gods from the mortal realm. There may be more on this in later chapters.

Chapter 17: Return to Potter Manor and Bad News for Riddle

After spending a few days at the Leaky Cauldron, Dobby informed Harry and Hermione that Potter Manor had been restored to standards befitting someone of their standing. Knowing Dobby as they did, neither of them even bothered trying to argue with the eccentric house-elf. After paying Tom for their time at the Leaky Cauldron, they thanked him for his hospitality.

"My pleasure Mr. Connors, Miss Connors," the barkeep replied. "I hope you've had a good time in London."

"That we have, Tom," Hermione answered. "The next time we're in town, we'll be sure to stay here."

Thanking the two for their support, Tom bid them a pleasant day as he continued about his work. Assuring Tom the pleasure was all theirs, Harry and Hermione left the tavern and entered Muggle London. Finding an alley close by, they ducked into it. Holding Hermione in a tight hug, Harry activated the Portkey to Potter Manor.

A moment later, they appeared before the gates of a small castle nestled deep within a forest. Instinctively, Harry walked up to the gates and, placing his palm against the Potter Family Crest, which was worked into the gate, and he said in a firm and confident voice, "I, Hadrian James Potter, do hereby resume control over the wards surrounding and protecting Potter Manor, as is my right and obligation as Head of the Potter Family."

Suddenly, Harry was surrounded by a brilliant blue glow. Harry's mind was bombarded by information pertaining to the wards and other protections covering Potter Manor and the surrounding land. Thank the gods for Occlumency, otherwise I probably would be reeling in pain right now. Shaking his head in an attempt to help clear it, Harry smiled at Hermione and stated that anyone trying to break through the protections would be in for a world of pain.

"I'd wager quite a bit, that Dumbledore some how managed to convince your parents to hide somewhere other than here," Hermione stated after a moment of thinking. "It wouldn't surprise me if he wanted their hiding place to be discovered."

"Given what the manipulative bastard has done that we already know about," Harry stated in agreement, "it wouldn't surprise me. I say, before we do anything else, we set up the Runic Fidelius Seal Stones around the property for more added protection."

"I agree," Hermione stated. "We don't know how many people know about this place, and the sooner we limit that number the better."

Calling for Dobby, Hermione asked if there were any other house-elves handling the property.

"There be three other house-elves besides Dobby, Mistress Hermione," Dobby answered. "Does Mistress Hermione wants Dobby to be getting others to be introducing themselves to Master and Mistress?"

"Thank you, Dobby," Hermione said. "That would be wonderful."

After Dobby popped away, Hermione turned to Harry and said, "What do you think the chances of us getting Dobby and the others to drop the Master and Mistress titles?"

"Not only do I think that won't ever happen," Harry replied, "but if any of the other house-elves are more tradition bound than Dobby is, we'd probably be given a scolding, worthy of Mrs. Weasley, for even suggesting such a break with tradition."

"Master Harry would be correct, indeed," a stern voice replied as Dobby and three other house-elves, dressed in simple tunics bearing the Potter Family Crest, similar to the tunic Dobby was now wearing, appeared.

"I am Dimsley, and am being the cook for the Potter Family. These two are my sons, Nodding and Janks. Nodding handles all the gardening and yard work, while Janks takes care of the stables."

At each of their introductions, the two younger looking house-elves bowed slightly. Continuing, Dimsley explained that when Dobby appeared at the manor with news of Harry and Hermione, all four house-elves went through the manor and surrounding property to make sure everything was in order for their arrival. "Seeing as Dobby be more familiar with Master and Mistress and your given

tastes," Dimsley stated. "He be assuming the position of the Master and Mistress's personal house-elf."

Given her response to the Master and Mistress issue, Hermione sent to Harry, I'm not going to even mention the issue of pay.

Wise move, Harry replied.

After formally introducing themselves to the house-elves, Harry confirmed there would be no problem with the house-elves continuing with their current positions. Hermione continued with the explanation of the Runic Fidelius Seal Stones and asked if it would cause a problem for the house-elves. Dimsley assured Hermione that as they were bound to the Potter Family, they would not be affected by them, however it would prevent other house-elves from locating the property.

Relieved at this news, Harry and Hermione enlarged the eight boundary stones and the central hearthstone from their previously shrunken state. With the four house-elves assistance, Harry and Hermione soon had the boundary stones placed around the entire property. This included the castle, itself, along with two hundred acres of the surrounding forest. Initially worried about how it would affect the local wildlife, magical and mundane, Dimsley assured them that given the druidic nature of the ward, as long as such creatures held a neutral or good intent toward the family, it would not affect them.

"Dimsley knowing a little about druids from Dimsley's mother," she explained when Harry asked where she had learned about how Druidic Wards worked.

As soon as Harry returned from placing the hearthstone in the center of the castle, which, incidentally was where the library was located, he and Hermione performed a ritual cleansing of their bodies and spirits before dressing in their formal Druidic attire. Standing before the hearthstone, the central focus of the Runic Fidelius Seal, Harry and Hermione raised their arms and began to chant in unison, in the language taught to them by Dari Àrmann.

Ancient Gods of the Land, Sky, and Sea,

We call upon you to bear witness to this Shrouded Rite.

Guide our hands, as we offer up our lifeblood

To empower this hearthstone.

By the powers of Earth, Air, Fire, and Water,

We give of ourselves to shield this place from view.

With that, both Harry and Hermione sliced open the palms of their hands with same sacred daggers which they had used when they first empowered the hearthstone and let their blood flow into the runic markings on the stone.

As soon as the last runic carving was filled with their blood, the whole stone lit up in a bluish green light. A few seconds later the glow faded, but the runic markings still glowed with a faint ethereal light. Reaching out with their senses, Harry and Hermione confirmed that a similar glow had surrounded each of the eight boundary stones as their link with the hearthstone was reestablished.

Raising his arms once more, Harry called out to Cernunnos,

Cernunnos, Forest Lord,

Master of the Hunt and Lord of the Underworld,

I, Hadrian James Potter, ask you to bestow your blessing on

this shrouded rite.

As Harry lowered his arms, Hermione raised her arms and called out to Brigid,

Brigid, Mistress of Flame and Wisdom,

I, Hermione Jean Drake, ask you to bestow your blessing on

this shrouded rite.

As Hermione lowered her arms, the hearthstone once again blazed with an ethereal light. The room was filled with the sounds of a roaring fire and the feeling one gets deep within a thriving forest.

After several minutes had gone by the light surrounding the hearthstone dimmed until it was an almost imperceptible glow. Knowing that their requests had been granted, Harry and Hermione thanked their respective patrons and finished the ritual by placing their runic medallions onto the hearthstone and once again allowed their blood to coat the runic carvings on both the medallions. This act renewed the medallions' connections with the hearthstone, thus linking both Harry and Hermione to the Runic Fidelius Seal, which now encompassed Potter Manor and the surrounding land.

Upon the close of the ritual, Dobby, along with Dimsley, appeared and led Harry and Hermione to the kitchen where they provided them with something light to eat and drink. Satisfied that her master and mistress had eaten enough, she had Dobby direct them to their bedroom to rest. Drained physically and magically, neither Harry nor Hermione had the energy to argue with either house-elf.

- Riddle Manor -

Tom Riddle, known to others as Voldemort, was livid. Neither Rabastan nor Rodolphus Lestrange had checked in for several days. He was getting ready to send a search party out to see what had happened to them, when an unknown owl delivered a small package to him, before leaving in a hurry. Knowing that post owls tend to know when they are the bearers of bad news, it was never a good sign when they didn't stick around after delivering a message. Opening the package, he found it contained a small glass orb filled with a glowing, smoky substance. It felt warm to the touch, and a few seconds after he picked it up the glow intensified and the globe dissolved. The smoky substance swirled around until it formed into the translucent shape of Dari Àrmann.

Greetings Thomas, it has been a while since we've last spoken, the image of Dari Àrmann said with a smile. By now, I suspect you are wondering where two of your loyal Death Eaters have gotten to. Well, there is no need to worry about them any longer. I have personally made sure they were sent on to face their final judgment before Teutatis. Given their past exploits I don't think either one of us has to guess how that judgment will turn out. In a show of fair play, I would like to suggest you pull all of your followers from the search for the two missing Hogwarts students. I'm sure you know to which two I am referring. If they actually manage to locate them-and that is a big if-I suspect they will be meeting the same fate as the Lestrange

brothers. They do not follow Dumbledore's policy of giving vermin like Death Eaters a second chance. Your time is coming Thomas, only you can decide how it's going to play out in the end.. I'd suggest you turn yourself in to the Ministry, but we both know that will never happen. Goodbye for now Thomas, I'm sure we will be seeing one another much sooner than you would like.

As the smoky substance quickly evaporated, Voldemort screamed in rage and began blasting the statues lining the walls of his chambers as he vented out his fury over the death of the Lestrangle brothers. Everyone vacated the area until he had calmed himself down. After managing to reign in his anger, Voldemort summoned all of his inner circle to him. When they all had arrived, he informed them of the deaths of Rabastan and Rodolphus. This, of course, set Bellatrix off and only after Lucius and Sirius had pinned her down, while Severus poured two calming potions down her, did she relax enough to be able to function rationally. Apologizing for her outburst, Bellatrix resumed her place in front of the Dark Lord.

"No apologies are necessary, Bella," Voldemort assured her. "I, myself, reacted in a similar matter upon learning of their deaths. My orders have not changed. No one is to search out Potter or Granger. Dari Àrmann has obviously turned his attention our way, and this is something we do not need. I will be taking care of this situation personally. The deaths of Rabastan and Rodolphus Lestrangle will not go unavenged. This I promise you. Continue on with your current assignments."

As the Death Eaters left, Voldemort pulled Sirius Black aside. "Keep an eye on your cousin, Sirius," Voldemort stated. "I feel that she will not let this matter drop and will try to search out Dari Àrmann on her own. Believe me when I say that she would not survive a confrontation with that particular wizard."

"I will do as you command, my lord," Sirius replied with a bow. As he left Riddle Manor, Sirius thought, If Bella decides to go after this Dari Àrmann, then no one will be able to stop her. As I don't have a death wish, my cousin is on her own. On the bright side, if she does die, then as Head of the Black Family, than the Lestrangle fortune, titles, and lands will belong to me. Smiling at this thought, Sirius took the Floo back to Black Manor. He needed to continue with his research into the ancient myths of Britain.

- Longbottom Manor -

While Voldemort was speaking with his inner circle, Lady Augusta Longbottom had just been delivered an oak box by an owl. Upon making sure the box was not laced with any traps, the matriarch of the Longbottom Family opened the box and immediately covered her mouth to prevent herself from screaming. She took a closer look at the two heads that lay in the box, and her mood suddenly improved when she realized the identities of the two heads. Taking another look to assure herself that she was not imagining things, she confirmed that the heads belonged to Rabastan and Rodolphus Lestrage. Laying next to the heads was a note stating simply, Two down, only one remains.

"Praise the Ancient Ones," Augusta called out. "My prayers have been answered."

Immediately taking quill to parchment, she wrote to her grandson about the news. This will definitely ease his mind, she thought as she handed the letter to the owl that had delivered the oak box. "Please take this to my grandson, Neville, at Hogwarts."

A short while later the owl was winging its way toward the owl entrance to the Great Hall at Hogwarts. Spying the recipient of the letter, the owl dove down to deliver it.

"Hey Neville," Ginny stated. "Isn't that your family seal on the letter?"

"Yes, love," Neville said. "It's got to be from my gran, as my uncle would have used the Croaker Family Seal."

Giving the owl a bit of bacon in thanks, Neville opened the letter, curious as to what was so important for his gran to have sent him an official letter bearing his family seal. Normally, she just sent correspondence with a generic wax seal. Placing a drop of his blood on the seal, it glowed green for a moment before dissolving away.

"What was that?" Ginny asked with a puzzled look on her face.

"The seal acted as a protection against anybody other than me from opening the letter without destroying the contents. If you want, later, I can show you how it's set up."

Stating that she would love to learn how it was done, Ginny continued eating while Neville read through the letter. Suddenly, Neville dropped the letter and raced out of the Great Hall toward Gryffindor Tower. Wanting to know what had caused this, Ginny took the letter Neville had dropped on the table, and read what it had said.

Dear Neville,

Yesterday I received an oak box with a note reading 'Two down, only one remains.' Along with the note were the heads of Rabastan and Rodolphus Lestrage. When they, along with Bellatrix Lestrage and Barty Crouch, Jr. were sentenced to life imprisonment in Azkaban, I left the matter be, thinking the Ministry would see that justice would be served. As it has become clear to me that the Ministry can not be trusted to take care of things as they should, I called upon the Ancient Ones for the justice that had been denied our family. With the delivery of the heads of Rabastan and Rodolphus Lestrage, I am certain that my call for justice has been heard and granted. Only Bellatrix remains, and I suspect her time is soon coming.

Your grandmother,

Augusta Longbottom

Ginny put her hand to her mouth in shock. Quickly putting the letter in her pocket, the young Gryffindor motioned to Fred and George to stay there and left the Great Hall toward Gryffindor Tower. Entering the Gryffindor Common Room, she found Neville dancing a jig. When he saw Ginny, Neville ran over to her and, taking her in his arms, swung her around. He laughed as he said, "They're dead."

Having been told by Neville, what had happened to his parents all those years ago, Ginny understood his happiness over the Lestrage brothers' death. "What do you think happened?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," Neville said. "Given that the old gods don't normally interfere directly with our world, I suspect that a follower of one of them was given the task of dealing with the Lestrages."

"That does make sense, from what little I know about the old gods," Ginny stated. "While my brothers and I were not raised in Old Ways, our mother made sure we still gave them the proper respect."

"Not many people, Magical or Muggle, follow the Old Ways any more," Neville said. "My gran's family has followed the Old Ways since the time when they were followed by everyone in Britain. She passed the traditions on to my father, and now to me."

"And one day, you'll pass them on to our children," Ginny said with an approving smile.

Realizing what Ginny had just agreed to, Neville pulled her into his arms. "Gran was a little worried that you wouldn't approve of raising any child of ours in the Old Ways. I told her there was nothing to worry about. Glad to see I can win at least one argument with her."

Chuckling at Neville's comment, Ginny replied, "Glad to help. Keeping the adults on their toes is our job and duty as teenagers."

"Fun too," Neville added.

Laughing, the two Gryffindors headed back down to the Great Hall.

- Hogwarts Library -

Behind privacy wards, taught to them by Professor Snape, Ron and Daphne were working on their Transfiguration homework. They were currently working on the theory behind the Inanimatus Conjurus spell, which was the first conjuring spell Professor McGonagall had taught them. She wanted three feet of parchment on the theory behind this basic incantation which conjures simple inanimate objects. Along with this, Professor McGonagall wanted a foot of parchment on the evolution of the field of conjuring.

"Ron," Daphne asked, "can you pass me the tome by Ryan Gilroy?"

Handing the requested tome to Daphne, Ron asked, "Was it in 1875 or 1876 that Gregory Delacruz developed the modification to the Avis spell to allow for other than birds to be conjured?"

"1876," Daphne replied. "I swear the professors get together and pile on the homework so we don't have time to do anything else."

"I agree," Ron stated, "Professor Flitwick wants two feet each on the Silencing Charm and the Summoning Charm. Professor Snape is the only professor who seems to be taking it easy on us."

"You only say that," Daphne said with a chuckle, "because Potions is your strongest subject. How or why you hid that fact for the last four years is beyond me."

"The answer to that lies in something I learned when I was little," Ron explained.

"Oh?" Daphne said, looking intrigued. "Do tell."

Ron put down his quill, and proceeded to tell Daphne about his hiding his true nature from everyone.

- Headmaster's Office -

"With the Death Eaters openly attacking both in the Muggle world as well as ours," Kingsley reported, "the Auror teams are starting to get spread awfully thin, and it will be at least two to three years before the current batch of Auror trainees are anywhere near trained enough to start helping. Fortunately, Director Bones has been able to wrangle better funding from Fudge. He may not be willing to agree that the Dark Lord has returned, but even Fudge has to concede the need for the DMLE to get better funding given the rise of these attacks."

"Speaking of Death Eater attacks," Hestia inquired, "why hasn't Snape warned us about these attacks?"

"According to Snape," Dumbledore replied, "Tom is only letting the members of the attack groups aware of the details and targets, and then only shortly before they head out."

"Is Severus in danger of being found out as a double agent?" Septima Vector, the Arithmancy professor asked.

"Severus assures me," Dumbledore answered, "his cover is still intact. At the moment, he has been tasked with potion making, and esoteric research."

"With the Dark Lord having regained his full strength and power, " Dedalus Diggle stated, "it will be just as bad, if not worse, than the last war."

"On that note," Arabella Figg, "I've recently had a chance to speak with the Dursleys and they are stating that they haven't seen Harry since before last year and have no intention of taking him back into their home if he ever does show up. As far as they are concerned, they will have nothing more to do with our kind."

"I suspected they would say as much," Albus commented. "You might as well return to your home in Hogsmeade, as there is no reason for you to stay there."

"Speaking of the Potter boy," Mundungus Fletcher said, speaking up, "was his mother's name originally Evans?"

"Yes it was," Albus said as he gave the man his full attention. "Have you heard something?"

"Two days ago, while I was poking around Diagon Alley," Mundungus Fletcher explained, "I overheard one of the more eclectic apothecaries thanking a James Evans for his business and that he would contact him once he found a buyer for the ingredients he had mentioned." Taking a small sip from a flask, he continued, "After waiting for a bit, I entered the shop and began to look around. When the owner asked if he could help me locate anything, I told him that my lord had me on the look out for unusual or rare potion ingredients. I mentioned that he was a Potions Master from abroad doing research here in Britain. After talking for a bit, the fellow mentioned that while he did not have any available at the moment, he had just made an arrangement to procure some extremely rare ingredients. When I asked the nature of the ingredients, he mentioned fire drake scales and blood, fur and claws from a shadow cat, and basilisk venom and blood. I told him I would inform my lord about the ingredients and get back with him within the next couple of days."

His mood drastically improved, Albus said, "It appears that at least Mr. Potter has returned to familiar ground, although I suspect Miss Granger has returned as well. Fletcher return to the apothecary and advise the owner that your lord is interested in purchasing quantities of all the ingredients Mr. Evans is supplying him. Alastor and

Dedalus, if you would keep an eye on the shop for Mr. Potter's or Miss Granger's appearance. With Tom's followers no doubt searching for them, they need to be taken into protective custody. Once they are safe, I can explain my actions to them, and we can finally put this misunderstanding behind us."

After the others had left, Albus sat behind his desk and, popping a lemon drop, thought about what he had learned. This matter is going to have to be handled delicately. The last thing I need is for that blasted druid to interfere more than he already has. If I can hide my involvement in this matter, he may not suspect anything. Their access to such rare ingredients will come in handy once they are "persuaded" that I know what's best for them. Chuckling to himself, Albus began to start planning on how to get things back on track as to how things should be.

Little did Dumbledore know, ancient forces were in play which would eventually see him facing judgment for his actions these past decades.

- Potter Manor -

Harry Potter was currently dodging various kitchen utensils and pans as he bolted out of the manor kitchen. Okay, trying to convince Dimsley that it was alright for me to cook something for Hermione and I was not one of the brightest ideas I've had, Harry thought as he ducked to avoid a rolling pin aimed for his head. After turning a corner, Harry was glad to see nothing was following him and slowed down. Noticing the time, Harry headed down to the basement. Among the changes Harry and Hermione made to Potter Manor, was the remodeling of the basement. Besides renovating and refurbishing the Potions Lab, they converted two of the storerooms to workrooms for their personal studies.

Hermione's was redone into a ritual chamber designed for the study and practice of Blood Magic. While several aspects of the art did not require the use of a ritual chamber, Hermione was currently researching the ancient art of blood runes used by the ancient Norse. She had learned of several rituals involving the carving of specific runes onto the body to enact a specific effect. These could range from temporary to permanent changes to the person performing the rituals. While she was not ready to actually perform any of these

rituals, she was fascinated with their uses and the possibilities they presented.

The old storeroom which Harry had claimed had been redone into a private study and summoning area for use in the art of Necromancy. Harry had learned that while most people who studied Necromancy were only able to touch on the basics of the art; it was only those who had developed a strong connection with death, who were able to fully develop any skill with it. Between his surviving the Killing Curse, amongst other things, Harry definitely possessed the needed connection. He had recently learned, through communion with Cernunnos, that the patronage of the horned god had earned him some respect from various denizens of the Underworld. This allowed Harry to begin most talks on at least a mostly level playing field. While Harry refused to delve into the more demonic areas of the art, he had exchanged various favors with a few of the more sentient beings who inhabited the Underworld. While these favors mainly involved the sharing of information, Harry had recently performed a difficult task for Ylyssa, a minor player in the Death Courts. Ylyssa, with Cernunnos's approval, had agreed to teach Harry the lost art of Soul Magic. This art, once mastered, would allow Harry to perform various acts on not only his soul, but others' as well. These acts ranged from the simple ability of reading a person's soul to determine their true nature, to being able to manipulate the very substance of the soul itself. This advanced skill was needed in order to both expel an unwanted soul from a being and to aid in the healing and protecting of a person's soul. Harry theorized that if one could become proficient enough in this magic, one could block the effects of the Killing Curse, which achieves its dreaded effect by severing the connection which existed between a being's physical form and its spiritual form.

As Harry entered his study, his thoughts turned toward the events of the previous night.

- FLASHBACK -

Hermione is going to kill me, when she finds out what I'm doing, Harry thought to himself as he stepped out of a shadow and onto the island where Azkaban Prison resided. I don't know how, and I don't know when, but she will find out about this. As Harry shifted into his Animagus form, he contemplated whether capturing a Dementor

was the most insane thing he had attempted. At the moment, it was beating out the time he faced the basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets.

Staying low and flitting through the shadows, Harry quickly made it inside the prison and down to the lower levels where the Dementors made their rounds. Reinforcing his Occlumency shields, Harry started to hunt for a Dementor that was wandering alone. Eventually, he came across one and put the next stage of his plan into effect. With Dementors being a form of minor wraith, this binding spell I found should hold it long enough for me to perform the imprisonment ritual that Dari Àrmann taught us to aid in the banishing of spirits trapped in the realm and prevented from going on to the next.

Shifting back into his true form, Harry quickly intoned the incantation, summoning forth all the authority he could muster, needed to keep the Dementor from escaping: Substringo Spiritus Fortier!

Feeling the binding start to take hold, the Dementor tried with all its might to resist the spell, but Harry's willpower was stronger and the spell held. Knowing that others could arrive at any moment, Harry quickly began to inscribe the necessary Ogham runes around the Dementor to aid in the ritual to imprison its physical and spiritual essence. Stopping only long enough to make sure the runes were written and placed correctly, Harry took out a stone he had carved into the shape of two snakes intertwined and each biting the others' tail. Holding the stone in front of him, Harry began to chant in the language he and Hermione had learned from Dari Àrmann. Sensing what was happening, the Dementor continued to struggle against its bonds and tried to resist the effects the ritual was causing. After several minutes, the Dementor conceded the fight and stopped all resistance to the imprisonment ritual. Its body quickly dissolved into a black mist which was sucked into the carved stone. Leaning up against a wall to catch his breath, Harry put the stone back into his robes and quickly made his way out of the prison.

As he left the prison, Harry thought to himself, Besides succeeding in my task, I learned that my Occlumency shields, coupled with my connection to Shadow element, makes me immune to the Dementors draining fear causing aura. Definitely a useful fact to know.

- END OF FLASHBACK -

As he opened the door to his study, Harry stared death in the face; Hermione was leaning against the far wall and she was in a word: furious. Gulping, Harry thought, I am so dead.

- Hogwarts: Headmaster's Office -

Albus had just received word from Mundungus Fletcher that he had returned from the apothecary and had placed the order as Albus had requested. The owner assured Fletcher that he should hear back from his supplier within a day or two with when the ingredients would be available. With the shop being watched by Alastor and Dedalus, Harry would soon be back under his control.

"Overconfidence, always was your main weakness," a voice replied, with a chuckle.

Quickly standing, Albus had his wand out and pointed in the direction the voice came from. Unfortunately, his wand was jerked from him by an invisible force. As Albus looked to where his wand was hovering, the image of one of the last people he wanted to see faded into view.

"Dari Àrmann, it's been a long time," Albus said politely.

Waving his hand toward Dumbledore, Dari Àrmann sent him backwards into his chair and immobilized him. "Spare me the fake pleasantries, Albus," the druid said with a glare. "You're insulting both of our intelligences if you honestly think I buy your polite greetings."

"I'm not the foolish young man I was when we last met, druid," Albus said with a sneer. "I've grown in power and strength since we last met."

"And yet, I was able to enter not only Hogwarts, but your very office, without your knowledge," Dari Àrmann replied with a smile. "This is how it's going to work, you manipulative old coot. You are going to shut up and listen, while I explain exactly what you are going to do."

"As it seems I have no choice," Albus replied, "you have my attention and my wand."

"Please," Dari Àrmann said as he rolled his eyes, "we both know you have your original wand in one of your sleeves, I merely took the wand you liberated from Grindelwald fifty plus year ago."

"Touche," Albus said with a nod.

"I am solely here to deliver a message," Dari Àrmann stated. "Stay away from Harry and Hermione. The days when you could control their lives are over. I say this not as a threat, but a warning. The day when all your power and influence will be for naught is coming, and you are powerless to stop it." Finished with his warning, Dari Àrmann smiled and vanished from Dumbledore's office.

This does not bode well for my plans, Albus thought. When he tried to get up from his chair, the wizard found that he was stuck to the chair.

Substringo Spiritus Fortier - Bind up spirit strongly

AN: And there ends the seventeenth chapter. Thank you all who have continued reading the story. During the next chapter, we'll see Ron and Daphne's relationship deepen, along with Bellatrix's response to the deaths of her husband and brother-in-law. We will also see Harry begin his training into Soul Magic, and Hermione delves deeper into Blood Magic.

Also, a reader has pointed out a minor issue with the naming of the story. Starting with the next chapter, I will be replacing the colon(:) in the title with a dash(-).